

Original Chapter 11: Jack Evans. *This biography chapter originally appeared in Part I, after Virginia Hardy and before Nick White. It tells the story of Charlie's experience writing the memoir of a 1950s-era Hollywood western film star named Jack Evans. The story involved research on western films and quick-draw techniques. It includes a portrayal of a colorful old Hollywood agent named Merle Adams and Charlie's scary-aggressive girlfriend, Bryn Sykes, who cut her hair short "so as not to get in her way."*

Original Chapter 11: Jack Evans

There's a scene near the end of the early 1950s western film *Road to Santa Fe*, where the hero, Johnny Hayes, is trapped alone on a desert hilltop by a gang of bandits. He takes cover behind a pile of rocks and counts the bullets left in his belt. The posse that was dispatched to rescue him is still miles away. His horse has run off, and he's bleeding from a gunshot wound to his shoulder. Just before the final gun battle, the action pauses for a moment. The camera closes in on Johnny's face—one of the most famous images in popular American cinema, the face of the actor Jack Evans. Evans's dusty, tanned skin is the color of the rocks behind him, as if he had been born out of them, and his eyes, which now look out toward the camera, are a piercing clear blue. Spread across the big screen, the face looks like the mask of a god.

After that, Johnny begins firing down the hillside at the bandits, and you can see why Evans never became a film star of the highest order. He has the embarrassed, self-conscious presence of a kid on stage in a school play. He moves in exaggerated pantomime and speaks mechanically as if reading words from an unfamiliar language. Over his career, Jack appeared in a lot of films—more than 100 in the fifties, sixties, and seventies—first in westerns, and later romantic dramas, and still later television and low-budget films in Europe. If he never rose to the tops ranks of stardom, he never entirely disappeared from the scene. His agent, the legendary Merle Adams, was a small-time dealmaker and hustler, who lacked the singular gift for discovering the one memorable role but had a thousand schemes for survival.

The result was that, after 30 years and scores of characters, what the public chiefly remembered about Jack Evans was what they had seen from the start of his career—that face. As a young man, his face appeared on hundreds of fan magazines and even on the cover of *Life* and *Time*. Eventually it became a kind of

American icon. The beat poet Kip Hammond once wrote a poem about Evans' face, which he called "our celluloid David, the wonder of our dreams."

I was hired to write the Evans autobiography while I was still finishing the Virginia Hardy book. Evans had already written his own life story and sold the manuscript to Macmillan, but the draft was a disaster. The book was written in a stolid, overly sincere style, with each chapter on a year in his life. The Macmillan editor, Teddy Fallon, who had been a Yale classmate of my editor at Harper, read a pre-press version of the Hardy book, and asked if I would be willing to rewrite the Evans biography.

The offer surprised me, since I had no track record in Hollywood. Fallon said he wanted me on the project because, once the Hardy book appeared, I would be associated with "serious" biography, and my shepherding of the Evans biography would send a message to critics and readers that this was a thoughtful history of an important actor. It would be more than two years before I discovered the true reason that I had been chosen.

I first met Jack, together with Fallon and Merle Adams, over lunch at the actor's house in the Hollywood Hills. The home was lost at the end of a winding road, in a remote canyon. The sprawling one-story structure had been built around a swimming pool in a grove of live oaks. Jack greeted us at the door. His voice still had a hint of the easy drawl of his childhood in Alabama. He wore a white polo shirt and white linen trousers.

Lunch was served on a patio beside the pool at the back of the home. A somber Spanish housekeeper brought us cold salmon and wine.

It was 1976, and Jack was in his early fifties. If possible, he was even more handsome now than at the start of his career. His face no longer had the open innocence of the kid he had been in his early films. There were dark circles under his eyes and lines etched in his forehead—a wised-up look of sadness and loss.

At that first lunch he was quiet, diffident, with the shy awareness of someone used to being stared at. He sat at one end of the table, content to listen while Fallon and Adams carried on an absurd conversation about the parallels between Jack Evans and Virginia Hardy. Jack himself offered no indication that he had read my book, other than to call it "a fine book about a fine lady."

Partway through the meal, it became clear that it was assumed by the others at the table that I would accept this project and that no other writer was being considered. As the lunch plates were being cleared, Adams proposed to pay me a fee more than twice what I had just received for the Hardy book.

After lunch Jack led us to a room that had been converted into a small theater, and we watched a copy of *Dark Mesa*. It was

the first film to feature Jack's longtime cowboy sidekick, Dane Johnson, who later was to win a supporting actor Oscar for his part as the repentant gunslinger in the Evans film *Denver City*. Fallon and Adams sat in the front seats and gabbed through the movie about the private lives of the supporting cast. Jack sat alone a few seats away from me, his face motionless staring at the screen.

When the film finished and the lights came on, I turned to Jack and asked him about the final scene in which he dies. Jack looked at me and paused as if trying to remember who I was. "Actually it wasn't in the original script," he said, "and I guess I didn't think it was right for my image. But the director, Creighton James, insisted on it. He said, 'Only God knows when you'll die, Jack. But in this picture your character's death is my decision.' I said something like, 'Are you God, sir?' And he said, 'On this picture I am. Read your contract.'"

Adams laughed. "Yeah that sounds like Creighton," he said. "Wasn't that his last picture? For chrissakes, write that down Charlie."

For the next year and a half, this was how Jack and I communicated. Sitting in the narrow home theater, we watched films together. Most of the time, Jack sat silently, smoking cigarettes and blowing smoke up into the projector's beam of light. Once in a while he would lean across the seats, lightly touch my arm, and whisper, "Watch this." We saw all his own films that way, and dozens of other films of the era. Jack had the reels couriered to his house from the studios, and he took great pride in threading the films himself onto the projector.

That first day in Jack's house, after the screening of *Dark Mesa*, Jack invited me to see the detached cottage at the far end of the property, which was to be my quarters while I worked on the book. The cottage was a trim, self-sufficient dwelling in which his mother had lived until her death. The little house had its own kitchen, a book-lined office where I set up my typewriter, and a separate gated entrance.

While Jack discussed arrangements with his housekeeper, Adams led me aside for a quiet conversation. His large toadlike head leaned close. He had rheumy eyes, and beneath them, bags that descended down his cheeks like the settling of a landmass. His breath smelled like the lunch wine. "Listen, Charlie," he said. "So we understand each other. I don't know why Jack wants this book. We do any book, it should be a photo book. He's the handsomest friggin' man in the friggin' world. People want to see his face. No one cares what Jack says about his life, do you? What I'm saying is, he's an actor. Tell a few acting stories, particularly the early pictures. And lay off the other stuff." He put the flat of his right

hand on my chest. “I’m telling you now so you understand. Okay, guy?”

* * *

Three months later, I moved into the cottage and began work on the book. My starting point was Jack’s own first draft. The manuscript had one virtue—its linear order. I tore the pages out of the binder that Fallon had given me, and tacked them around the walls of the office so that I could see the path of his life as I paced around the room. My job was to discover the stories that would breathe life into the biography, and to find the images and metaphors beneath the surface of the events that would give it depth and meaning.

Jack had been born to a poor southern family. His real name was Clyde Flowers. His father ran a service station, and his mother raised four children. After high school he joined the Navy and served on a destroyer in the Pacific during the Second World War. At the end of the war, when the Navy deposited him in southern California, he found his way to UCLA. He signed up for a school theatrical production of *You Can’t Take It With You* as a way to meet girls. His inability to act was leavened by a knack for memorizing pages of dialogue and by that handsome, earnest face that audiences were drawn to watch. At the end of his freshman year, he dropped out of college and took a job with a stock company in Long Beach, where he was discovered by a studio agent.

His first film role was a non-speaking part in the 1949 western *Badge of Honor*. He plays a callow youth and appears in two scenes—one where he winks at a young girl played by a very young Katherine Denton, and the other where he unwisely draws his gun on the sheriff.

That same year he was cast in another western, *Fort Defiance*, in a small part as the youngest brother of John Holt, the famous cowboy actor-singer. Jack has a few lines, and he speaks in that sweet Southern accent that was much later to become a standard for impressionists, even though here it seems incongruous beside Holt’s flat Midwestern speech.

With his first starring role in his next film, *Colt 45*, Jack burst memorably onto the national scene. He plays a young deputy who foils a bank robbery and gains the respect of a small western town. The film was written by Frank McWilliams and directed by James Fisher. Over the next ten years, this team of Evans, McWilliams, and Fisher was to make eight films together, which were to define Jack Evans’s character as a tough man of action and few words.

His acting in these movies is awful. For the most part his face is a stiff mask, so that it's impossible to tell what his character is thinking. In a few scenes, here and there, perhaps prodded by the director or a studio acting coach to express *something*, Jack furrows his brow or snarls at the camera.

The best of these films—like *Man From Tucson* and *Boot Hill*—use Jack's awkward acting as part of the characterization. In *Man from Tucson*, when Jack's best friend is killed in a gunfight, and Jack is trapped by the dead man's family's obsessive need for revenge, his lifeless eyes and his mechanical phrasing seem like a demonstration of his character's torment.

In the 1960s, as the popularity of western films waned, Jack turned to romantic dramas, and he barely survived the transition. In the early movies, like *Mr. Bentham* and *East Side Affair*, where Jack plays a bachelor lawyer and an ad man, he lumbers through the apartment sets as if he had just climbed down from the saddle and was unused to seeing furniture. He made a handful of these films—*Love in a Brownstone*, *57th Street*, and *The Trouble with Justice*—gradually appearing less packaged in a business suit. He was still more beautiful than anyone else in sight, and producers seemed to figure out that the less that Jack said the better. As a result, in all these films, he plays essentially the same character—a quiet, undemonstrative professional man who wins women's hearts by saying and doing less than the other men around him. Looking back on these films, one can also sometimes see, in one scene or another, the first hints of sadness in Jack's face, the weariness in his eyes.

By the end of the sixties, the string ran out, and the studio, unable to tell the same story one more time, bought out the last two films in his contract. Without missing a beat, Adams guided his star to that other Hollywood universe—television. Still relatively young, the TV world welcomed film stars like Jack—they came with built-in images that were larger than life. In Jack's case, however, the scale was the problem. His classic chiseled features and his stiff manner needed the larger canvas. His persona was more landscape than portrait. On the small screen he was unconvincing. He looked shrunken, a pocket version of himself. In one series he played a father raising two small children on his own. In another he was a detective in San Francisco. Each lasted a season.

After that, Adams began to search the margins. He took Jack to Italy to play Jason in a hero epic and then to Spain to be one of the disciples in a film on the last days of Christ. "Bearded pictures," Adams called them. American audiences who found these films had the bizarre experience of watching them with dubbed sound tracks and seeing Jack's familiar face speaking

Italian and Spanish with more inflection than Jack had ever spoken English.

* * *

Jack had just returned from the latest of these European adventures when I met him, and he still had a tan from three months on a set outside Madrid. Our routine was for Jack to come to my cottage in the late morning and to take me back to the theater. We watched two films, back to back, like an old double feature. Then we sat together in the office of the cottage. Jack liked the dark snugness of the room. He walked around the room, staring at the pages of his book tacked to the wall, telling stories with the tape recorder running. In the evening I read the previous day's transcripts, and then in quiet of the following morning, before anyone else awoke, I wrote.

Despite the blandness of his own draft, Jack had a gift for telling stories. Recalling his famous fistfight with John Holt at the end of *Fort Defiance*, Jack told me how on one take he turned his head the wrong way, allowing a stuntman to hit him squarely on the jaw and knock him unconscious. An assistant director, furious at the time that this accident was going to cost the production, knocked the stuntman to the ground—at which point, the crew walked off in protest. Jack, then an unknown actor, awoke five minutes later to find himself on his back in the dirt street of a silent, empty set.

For the film *Boot Hill*, where Jack plays Sheriff Eldon Winter, he had to learn quick-draw techniques from the stuntmen. The crew gave him a special .45 caliber Ruger Blackhawk revolver, whose sight had been filed off and whose hammer spur had been turned up to make it easier to fan, and a custom holster with a wider, more open boot. Jack was taught the “twist draw,” in which the shooter twists the gun on its side as he withdraws it from the holster and fires it almost upside down. With a few weeks of practice, he was able to draw and shoot in half a second, or twelve frames of film. One afternoon, in the midst of our interviews, Jack found a pair of old Blackhawks and holsters and loaded the guns with black powder blank cartridges. We stood for an hour, side by side next to the pool, drawing and firing, the gunshots echoing in the small canyon that surrounded Jack's home.

In *Love in a Brownstone*, the character actress Margaret Dunham played his mother. Remembering the filming, Jack told the story of the scene where she welcomes him home. Dunham arrived on the set uncharacteristically distracted. Unknown to the rest of the crew, she had just learned of the death of her only son in a motorcycle accident. On the third take, she broke down as she

embraced Jack, and while she wept uncontrollably and he held her against his chest, the cameras rolled for the most memorable scene of the film.

Outside his career, Jack led an unremarkable life. He had been married three times and had two adult children. His first marriage had been to Sheryl Wheeler, his childhood sweetheart and the mother of his children. His second marriage was to the actress Sandra Douglas, who had called him the best-looking man in America. Their marriage had begun with a publicized wedding in Malibu and ended after two years in divorce. At the time of his biography he was living with his third wife, a Persian model named Shireen. She spoke English in a shy, halting voice. I saw her sometimes in the morning, walking through the gardens, singing to herself.

He had a few friends, mostly from his years in feature films. Once or twice a month he hosted small parties for them. Dane Johnson, Jack's cowboy sidekick, came with his wife. The actress Kay Townsend, who starred in several films with Jack in the sixties, brought her latest boyfriend. These old friends ate in the formal dining room and afterward played Sinatra records and danced in the den.

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After a year and a half, I finished a first draft of the book and gave copies to Jack and Adams. Jack called me the next day to tell me how much he liked the book. "You're a magician, Charlie," he said. "It's like you have my voice. I don't see anything to change."

Adams's secretary called me at the end of the week and scheduled a meeting. When I arrived, the old agent sat behind his desk in the gloom of the late afternoon, and didn't rise as I entered. "What the hell's going on, guy?" he growled at me. "I thought we had an agreement, you and me. What the hell's this?" He picked up the draft manuscript and dropped it on his desk.

"I think it captures the story of Jack's life just the way . . ."

"Captures? I don't give a shit about captures. I told you I wanted a few acting stories. Something to wrap around the friggin' photographs. And you give me this captures shit."

He slid the manuscript toward me. The top page was red with slash marks.

I started to speak, but Adams pointed his finger at me. "You're lucky I don't sue your friggin' ass. I called Teddy and said I was going to sue you. Friggin' breach of friggin' promise. You signed a contract, you remember that?"

"This is Jack's life," I said.

“What kind of a writer are you? I tell you how many times a day I take a dump, you going to write about that? Why the hell do you think we picked you? You do what we tell you.”

“I want to talk to Jack,” I said.

“Talk to him all you want,” Adams said. “The deal is, fix this, or you’re fired. You got two friggin’ weeks.”

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After the Virginia Hardy book had been released, I had developed a modest reputation in the literary world. My agent found opportunities for me to speak on college campuses and participate in public panel discussions with titles like “Truth and Fabrication in the Autobiography” and “Memory in Memoirs.” I taught a class at USC on biography. Publishers solicited my endorsement of other writers’ book, where I was identified on dust jackets as Charlie Teller, author of the critically acclaimed *Virginia Hardy*. For a while, I was a bright light in a small universe.

The money from the book was modest, but it allowed me to buy a condo in Venice, California. While I was writing the Jack Evans book, I spent my weekends there. On Saturdays, I continued to write fiction. I wrote a series of stories about young professionals working in LA, wholly unconnected to the film industry but with that world as a backdrop to their stories. I started a novel about a young insurance executive, whose job involved the valuation of human lives.

No matter how tired I was from the week’s writing of Jack’s autobiography, I looked forward to these Saturdays. From childhood, I had been captivated by the process of inventing characters and telling their stories. There was something wonderful about creating their world and speaking in their voices. Sometimes I think I was half in love with writing stories. I remember now that I even fell in love with several women in my stories, creating them with all the passion and tenderness of a partner.

Commercially nothing much came of it. From time to time, I published one of my stories in a literary review, but my success as a biographer did not give me any cachet as a fiction writer.

On Saturday evenings, I threw parties at my Venice house for old friends from Princeton. At one of these parties I met and began dating a young would-be screenwriter named Bryn Sykes. Bryn had come to LA from somewhere back east, and when I met her, she was working as a reader at Paramount. Her real vocation, though, was to find someone to produce one of her scripts or story ideas—what she called her “projects.” When I knew her, Bryn was always on the verge of having a project produced. Week by week, one or another of her ideas rose to prominence and balanced on the

brink of discovery. Someone was interested in her project. She was waiting for a call about a project.

Several times a week, her attention would settle on me, and we'd make love in a nervous, caffeine-fuelled way, and afterward we would lie in bed and talk about my writing and how it might be used in a project.

Bryn liked a short story of mine called "Benedict Canyon." It told the story of a jogger who's on his usual morning run when he sees a rape in progress. The female victim sees him but is unable to speak. Although the rapist's back is turned to the jogger, it is clear that he has a weapon. Fearful of intervening, the young man runs back to his home and calls the police. By the time they arrive at the scene, the rapist and the woman are gone and never found. The young man is haunted by the woman's face and his own decision.

It seemed to me too slight a story to be made into a film. Undeterred, Bryn wrote a ten-page story treatment that expanded it into a mystery. A young producer at Warner Brothers read it and called us in for a meeting. He said he liked the story, but wanted to make it one of several crimes in a movie that he was already developing. A month later at a second meeting, he told us that now it was being considered as part of a buddy-cop movie that was in development. It was a story that one of the characters tells the other in a bar. After that, we never heard from the producer again, and when Bryn called him, she discovered he no longer had an office at Warners.

My autobiography of Jack Evans was of interest to Bryn only to the extent of what might be done with it as a project. She spent hours telling me how she would stage this or that scene in a made-for-TV movie based on the book. After my meeting with Merle Adams in which he gave me an ultimatum to rewrite the book, I drove over to Bryn's apartment. When I told her what Adams had said, she laughed. "Adams is a jerk. You should sue *him*."

She sat cross-legged on her chair, leaning forward. There was something beautiful and scary about her. Her hair had been cut very short, shorter than mine, as if—I had always imagined—so as not to get in her way. "Publish it yourself," she said. "Jack likes it, that's the important thing."

"My contract's with Adams," I said.

Bryn was uninterested. "You know, Charlie," she said. "Your book has the elegiac quality of the best western films. It's about the end of something. An earlier time in the film business when the large horizons were barely contained on the big screen. Jack was part of that, one of the cowboy stars who opened up the

vast territory of the young country, before it turned dark and cynical by the Kennedy assassinations and the Vietnam War.”

In her own mind, Bryn was already selling my book. Each time I demurred and raise practical objections, she lost a few degrees of interest. After an hour, her mind had returned to her own latest project. As it turned out, the Evans biography *was* about the end of something—the end of my relationship with Bryn. My reluctance to take a stand on the book loosened her interest in me for good. A month later when we broke up, she told me my problem was I could never “pull the trigger.”

* * *

The day after Adams gave me his ultimatum, I met with Jack and showed him the suggested cuts. Jack was sitting in the courtyard of his house, smoking a cigarette. He registered little surprise at the markings in the manuscripts. He flipped through two or three pages and then handed the book back to me. “Maybe it was too long,” he said.

I offered to call Fallon and try to negotiate the changes. Jack shrugged. He blew a stream of smoke out over the pool. “I’m sorry if we’ve wasted your time, Charlie,” he said. “I’d hate for you to think that we didn’t appreciate everything you’ve done.”

“No,” I said. “No, I know that.” I wondered if he had any idea of my encounter with Adams.

We sat there in silence for a while.

“I hear you have another film coming up,” I said. “Something in Portugal?”

“Three months,” Jack said. “Merle says it’s a good role.”

There was silence again. I thought that Jack was waiting for the cigarette to burn down. Then he said, “You know what we should call the book? *Lonesome Trail*. What do you think?”

In the early years of Jack’s career in the 1950s, one of the westerns that he made with McWilliams and Fisher was called *Lonesome Trail*. It told the story of two young boys growing up on a ranch in Wyoming at the end of the nineteenth century. The frontier was ending, and civilization was establishing itself even in the remote reaches of the West. The two boys competed at being cowboys and fell in love with the same girl. Brodie, the young man played by Jack, earns a job on a ranch. His friend, Martin, settles for a job as a schoolteacher, but in doing so, marries the girl and raises a family. In the end, Brodie has won the boyhood competition, only to live out his existence playing an archetypical figure without a place in the real world.

Whatever my biography did or did not capture, the real Jack Evans was the man sitting with me in the courtyard that day.

A quiet, humble man who conscientiously tried to do his best as an actor. A professional who accepted the parts assigned to him. Years before, he must have seen that his true art lay in the raw beauty of his own face. In its perfection, audiences saw what they imagined truth and honesty to look like, and Jack recognized that he would never succeed in creating anything as memorable. He had traded an ordinary life back home in Alabama for the life of a film star. His films transformed him, and made him more wondrous than he had ever dreamed of being.

The book was to have been the one act of rebellion in his career—a written testament to the necessity of his life. Once at the start of our collaboration, I asked Jack why he wanted to tell his story. He smiled. “No one’s had a life like mine, have they, Charlie?” he said. But even he seemed to sense the futility of the effort, writing his own first workmanlike draft with a chapter for each year of his life, as if the only way his experience would actually add up to something like a book was by writing a series of annual reports.

In the end, Jack’s autobiography, *Lonesome Trail: The Life of Jack Evans*, turned into something different from what either he or I had intended. Fulfilling my contractual obligations, I made all the cuts that Adams demanded, halving the book in length. The text ended up being, as the agent had requested from the beginning, “something to wrap around the friggin’ photographs.”

Ironically, having gotten everything he wanted, Adams nonetheless hated the final product. “For chrissakes, it sounds like the guy’s dead. How’s anybody supposed to know he’s still working?”

Just as ironically, having capitulated again, Jack himself was proud of his autobiography. He appeared on talk shows and received offers for new parts.

The photographs of Jack were beautiful. They were largely taken from the westerns, when Jack was at the peak of his career, and included action photos from the films as well as candid off-camera snapshots of Jack relaxing with his co-stars. Some of the best photos were early black-and-white publicity stills of a very young Jack Evans, a sweet kid smile on his face and his whole life ahead of him.

Overall, the book received modest praise. Some critics ignored the text altogether, and classified the book as a photo album. The big East Coast reviewers found my ghosted autobiography pretentious and over-reaching, but the public—Jack’s fans—embraced it, and the paperback sold in record numbers. I earned a reputation in the industry as someone who could handle a name.

I also received my first fan mail. A few of the letters were unappreciative of my contribution. Like this:

Dear Mr. Teller,

I noticed that the cover of Jack Evans' new autobiography contains a small line on the bottom that says "with Charlie Teller"—which is too bad, because the print goes over the bottom of Jack's chin and louses up the picture. What does "with" mean? Were you in the room when he wrote it? Is it possible to get a copy of the book without your name on it?

Sincerely,

James E. Packer,
Memphis, Tennessee

Others were more understanding:

Dear Mr. Teller,

I wanted to thank you for helping Mr. Evans to write his autobiography. He's a very busy man, and it was good of you to write down all his stories. You look like a very kind young man in the photo on the back of the book. I'll keep your career in my prayers.

Sincerely,

(Miss) Eleanor Sims Hoopton
St. Petersburg, Florida

Three years after the book appeared, Jack Evans was killed in a freak accident on a movie set—thrown from a horse during a remake of *Dark Mesa*.

His funeral was one of the last of those large public Hollywood memorials. The service took place in a chapel in Pasadena. Three thousand people showed up, jamming afternoon traffic on Interstate 210. Merle Adams read the eulogy, including three stories that a few years before he had cut out of the autobiography. The mourners filed slowly through the chapel, down an aisle forested with giant flower bouquets. In front of the pulpit, the line paused beside the laminated white coffin perched on plaster Greek columns. On the coffin top sat a framed photo, one of those early black-and-white publicity stills, the face turned in a three-quarter pose, the eyes gazing straight back at the camera, like a final gift to his fans.