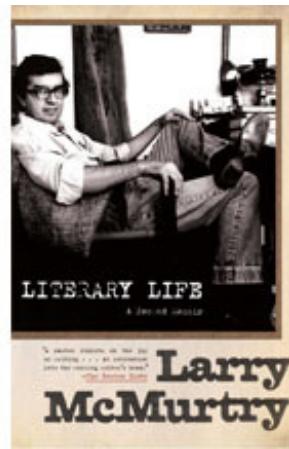
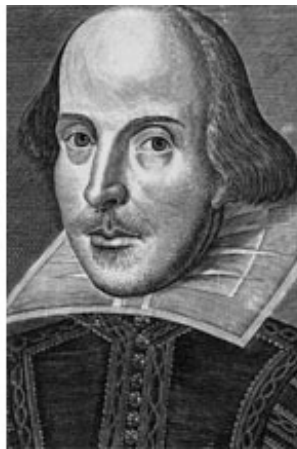


jcannonbooks

Because everybody  
needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter



## Triptych

Every book ever written is the same book.

Doesn't matter what language it was written in, when it was written, how long it is, or who wrote it.

Every book is about greed, love, or betrayal.

Sometimes two of those. Sometimes all three, a literary hat trick. What does this mean for you, the author? The pressure's off. The literature puzzle becomes a straightforward matter of writing about greed, love, or betrayal in a way no one else has ever done. Why worry about deeper meaning when that has been solved for you? The frame is there, it has always been there, and all you have to

do is throw on a coating of words. The words must be inventive, widely admired, and alluring, but you only need about eighty thousand for a novel (even fewer when you consider you will have unavoidable repeats like conjunctions).

I offer evidence from across the spectrum for doubters and those who think this judgment is too dark.

*Hamlet* has got it all, although the title could have been reworked. My suggestion would have been *Everybody Dies in Denmark*. Hamlet dies. Polonius dies. Ophelia dies. Laertes, Gertrude, and Claudius. Dies, dies, and dies. But the thematic big three survive: Claudius is a power-grabbing rat; as if Hamlet doesn't deal with enough figurative backstabbing, he gets an actual stabbing; Gertrude could have waited a bit before marrying her brother-in-law, at least until her son stopped talking to skulls in the graveyard; and Hamlet and Ophelia share love, clouded as it is with madness and rage. Greed, love, and betrayal dressed provocatively in phrases still familiar today, which happens to be Shakespeare's 461st birthday. What a piece of work.

*The Demon of Unrest* by Erik Larson is evidence that the theorem works in recently published nonfiction as well as classic fiction and drama. Greed? I can't think of much that is greedier than trying to maintain slavery on national and personal levels. Betrayal? Civil war seems to fit.

*Empire of Pain* by Patrick Radden Keefe. As long as we're on nonfiction, consider this meticulous reporting about the Sackler family's relentless, outrageous pursuit of wealth built upon other people's addictions.

*Demon Copperhead* by Barbara Kingsolver. And as long as we're on addiction, consider the presence of literature's trinity on these pages. People can argue about which of the three dominates this recent novel set in Appalachia, but my choice is betrayal. Specifically, urban America's betrayal of rural America and the resulting tsunami of social ills.

*Slow Horses* by Mick Herron. The first of several spy thrillers in which you can enjoy the marvelous Jackson Lamb. He's crass, disgusting, and finds betrayal to be profoundly aggravating.

*Moby-Dick*. Herman Melville's story of a man's lifelong love for his pet whale, or something like that.

*Lonesome Dove* by Larry McMurtry. Some critics say McMurtry set out to blow up Western stereotypes, worn-out stock characters, and inaccurate storylines, and in the process created a new Western mythology. We should all be

thankful. **Greed:** You remember that Gus and Call hit upon the idea of driving cattle from Texas to the Montana Territory, where they expected nonexistent ranching competition. However, they lacked an essential ingredient for any cattle drive. Cattle. Their solution was to go to Mexico and rustle (perhaps you prefer to say steal) what they needed. **Love:** The book is leavened with the romantic inclinations of many characters, but perhaps the book's soul is the love between old friends Gus and Call. They're different, they argue, they plot, and they would never call it love, but they are practically brothers. **Betrayal:** An unavoidable thread of the story—it sounds like an apology if you read deeply enough—is how the ever-growing number of settlers from the east acted out what they considered to be their manifest destiny in the west, sold out those who had lived on the land for millennia, and ignited a ruthless cycle of violence.

Side note: I've read that McMurtry, who owned bookstores in Texas besides writing every day and doing a celebrity turn, would just as soon bite your head off as sell you a book if you visited his Archer City store and asked him the wrong question. Gotta love irascibility.

*The Great Gatsby*, in which F. Scott Fitzgerald corners the market on greed, love, and betrayal. If there were an Imagery Hall of Fame, a permanent exhibit would have to be set aside for Fitzgerald's tone-perfect creation of the green light and a mesmerized Jay Gatsby. Fitzgerald's genius also gave us the valley of ashes, a portrait of feckless rich people, and the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg. The hundredth anniversary of the book's publication is this month, and it's hard to believe that in 1925 its sales were anemic and critics were indifferent. The U.S. Army helped fix that about twenty years later (but a few years after Fitzgerald's death) by printing 155,000 copies of the book and distributing them to GIs during World War II, perhaps to atone for the cigarettes it included in every C-ration and K-ration. GIs loved the book. Good job, Scott. Can I call you Scott?

Not feeling comfortable placing your book up against something by Fitzgerald or Shakespeare? Lesser authors than you have done so, and even terrible books are subject to the rule of three.

*Murder in Vegas*. Michael Connelly, who birthed the celebrated Harry Bosch, edited this 2005 collection of short stories by various authors. It is mostly abysmal. But the stories, or as many of them as I could choke down years ago when I picked up the book, are about greed, love, and betrayal.

*Use of Force* by Brad Thor is a slag heap of words. And, somehow, a bestseller. It includes this memorable line: "... they then walked the rest of the way in on foot." (I know that because I noted it in my book log; I have some quirks.) The

book was probably about greed, love, and betrayal. Not sure. I'm trying to forget that a small but irretrievable part of my life was used to read this book.

Long ago, I was taught that the three ways to describe any book were these: A person's inhumanity toward another person, a person's inhumanity toward himself or herself, or a person's inhumanity toward nature. In those days of gender shorthand and before pronouns had political freight, the themes were known as man's inhumanity to man, etc. In today's world, I suggest that the universal, underlying themes of books are better expressed as greed, love, and betrayal.

We are settled. Your only job as a writer is to find the right words.





Horatio and Hamlet (and alas, poor Yorick) with a gravedigger. A 1773 painting by Edward Edwards, printmaking by John Hall. Folger Shakespeare Library digital collection.

---

Kind regards

jcannonbooks

April 2025



©2025 jcannonbooks | 9245 Twin Trails Drive #721492 San Diego CA 92172

[Web Version](#)

[Forward](#)

[Unsubscribe](#)

Powered by  
**GoDaddy Email Marketing**®