

Fame And Fortune Were Strangers
Despite Her Best-Selling Novel

No Happy Ending For Grace Metalious

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By WILLIAM COCKERHAM
Special to the Monitor

GILMANTON — Twenty-five years ago, a young housewife named Grace Metalious startled the nation with a novel called *Peyton Place*. It was her first book, and the acclaim that greeted it should have been a dream come true for the 32-year-old author.

In a sense, it was. Her spicy, soap-opera story of love, lust and murder in a small New Hampshire town sold more than 10 million copies, making it the best-selling novel of all time for years.

The success of *Peyton Place* held out the promise of instant fame and fortune, and it took this small New England village and put it prominently on America's literary map.

But for Metalious, fame never amounted to anything more than notoriety. And fortune never materialized at all. She died of a chronic liver ailment at 39 because of a one-fifth of liquor-a-day habit, and her estate that was almost a quarter of a million dollars in debt.

A white marble tombstone with the simple inscription, "METALIOUS, Grace, 1924-1964," is all that marks the grave of the most famous former resident of Gilmanton — a town which bitterly resented both the image of *Peyton Place* and the woman who created it.

Metalious is buried in a pine and birch-shaded plot in the 18th century Smith Meeting House Cemetery. The modest grave marker, set off in a corner from the other tombstones in this wild-flowered cemetery, is a stark and lasting reminder of the ostracism she suffered from friends and neighbors as a result of her success. Instead of enjoying a soaring literary career, she saw her husband lose his job; she endured obscene phone calls at home, and her three children were the objects of cruel remarks at school.

"I don't know who it could be, but someone puts flowers, a little something, on her grave every year," said one elderly resident. The woman admitted to reading Metalious's historic novel when it was published 25 years ago, but vowed never to buy it.

Gilmanton has changed little in the last quarter-century. The village of less than 2,000 people is centered around a small corner store with two gas pumps, a white steepled church and a one-room wooden library that is only open on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

The village recalls one of Metalious's off-color remarks about New England towns: "To a tourist, these towns look as peaceful as a postcard picture, but if you go beneath that picture it's like turning over a rock with your foot. All kinds of strange things crawl out."

Peyton Place is tame by today's standards. But in the 1950s, many readers considered it a dirty book because of its blunt portrayal of sex and violence in a small town. The novel, which was banned in many communities throughout the country when it was first published, focused on the lives of Constance MacKenzie, an unwed mother who bitterly guarded her secret past while trying to raise an in-

quisitive and forthright daughter; and Selena Cross, a young woman who bludgeons her stepfather to death with a pair of fire tongs after he rapes her.

Selena's friend Joey, concerned that she might be hanged for murder, convinces her to bury her stepfather Lucas in the sheep pen.

She wrapped the blanket around the crushed thing that had been her stepfather. Only his body was recognizable. When she and Joey dragged him out of the house, the wind caught at the skirts of her robe and nightgown and wrapped them tightly around her legs. Lucas' blood seeped through the blanket and left a red trail in the drifting snow.

The scene was conjured up in Metalious's imagination, the murder was not. It actually happened in a small town in New Hampshire.

Even though a quarter of a century has passed since the publication of that book and the author has been dead 16 years, some people here still can't talk about Metalious without saying they thought she brought shame to the town and her neighbors.

"People were horrified (when 'Peyton Place' was published). Personally, I think she hurt the town. I suspect a lot of those things she wrote were about herself. She was just a so-and-so, you know. She had a good husband, but she was a tramp. That's what I heard, and that's what I surmise," said George Roberts Sr., an elderly real estate broker in town.

"A lot of people didn't like it," recalled John Chandler,

a Laconia lawyer who represented Metalious. "They thought it hurt the town and they let their feelings be known to Mrs. Metalious and her family. Some of those feelings were expressed to her face, and other by just avoiding her."

Chandler said Metalious was misunderstood by her neighbors. "She was a person of some insight, mercurial in temperament, but impulsively generous and kind to her friends. I guess you might say she was a soft touch."

Evelyn Swain's husband was a plumber who did work for Metalious while she was alive. Most people in town read *Peyton Place*, she said, "but you'll find few who will admit it. The reaction to her book was terrible. I felt very sorry for her children. They suffered from it the most."

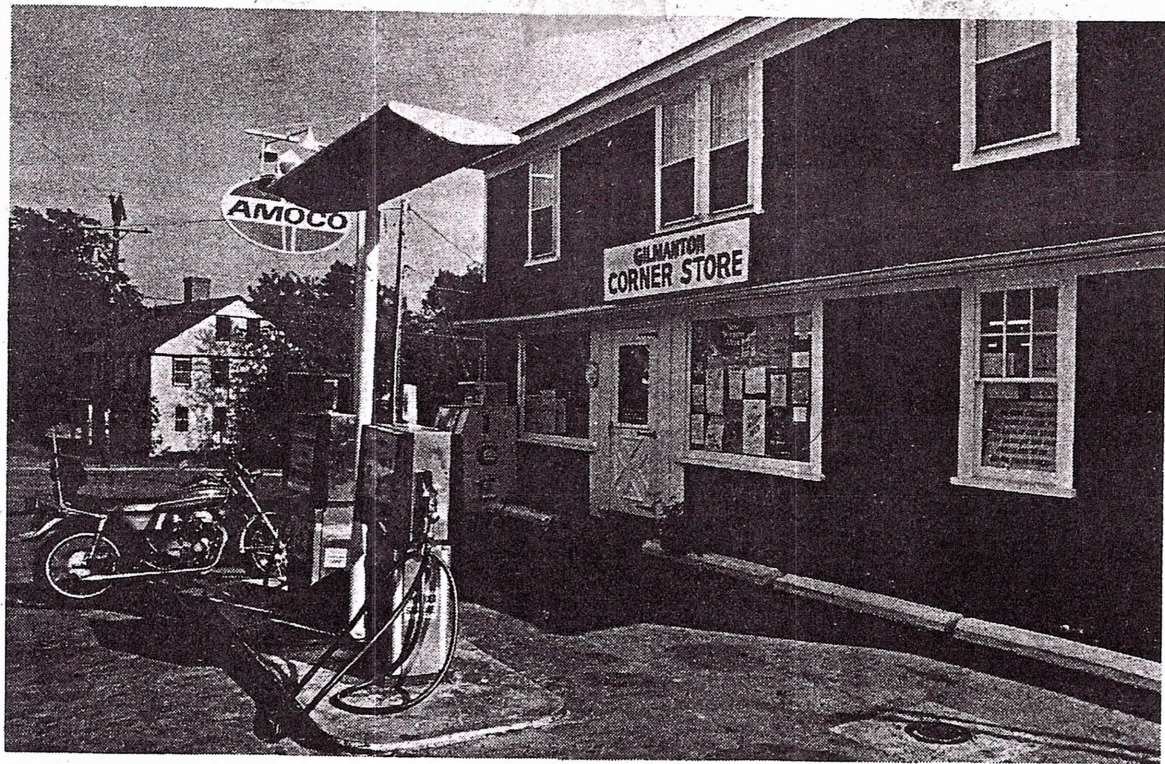
Donald Hislop, 48, had just gotten out of the Navy when Metalious's book was published. He said it was still a topic of conversation in town.

"A lot of people joke about it. Whenever something awful happens in Gilmanton, they say, 'Well, what can you expect? It's just Peyton Place,'" he said.

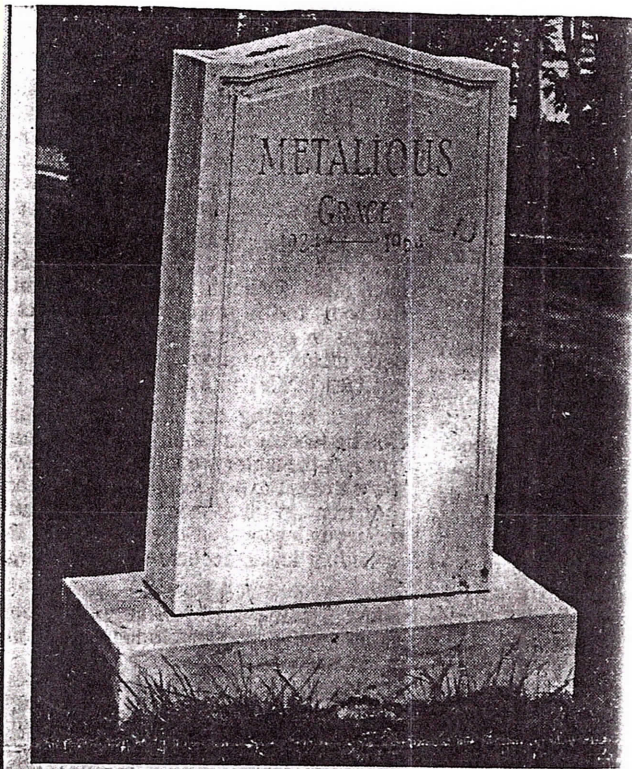
Hislop said he started to read *Peyton Place*, "but I lost interest in it. 'The reaction was mixed. Some people liked it and some thought it was an awful misrepresentation of the town. If you ask me, I don't imagine she wrote everything she knew.'"

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The corner store off Rt. 140 sells gas, ice and sundry notions.



The simple marker of the author of 'Peyton Place'

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Emily Toth, a professor at Pennsylvania State University, probably knows Metalious as well as anyone. She spent three years doing research for a biography of Metalious, *Inside Peyton Place*, which will be published in September.

"She was a very complex person. She was a feminist, a real sloppy housekeeper, and really ahead of her time. I think I would have liked her, but I would also have felt sorry for her," she said.

The three Metalious children "really did suffer," Toth said. "They were harassed to the point that they didn't want to go to school. They were abused not only by other

children, but from the grownups in town, as well."

Townpeople used Metalious' drinking problem as ammunition in attacking her, Toth said.

Toth said she became interested in Peyton Place and Metalious after the death of Elvis Presley in 1977.

"I was living in the mid-west during the '50s and I can tell you it was boring. It was really the pits. Elvis and Peyton Place were the only two things in that decade that gave you hope there was something going on out there," Toth said.

Marti Freirich, of Trade Paperbacks, which recently republished *Peyton Place*, described the book as "an event. It was the forerunner of the episodic novels."

"My parents wouldn't let me read it, but I doubt parents of today would even raise an eyebrow. It's actually pretty tame stuff by today's standards," she said.

At the time it was published, it was the best-selling novel of the century. Only *Valley of the Dolls*, *The Exorcist* and *The Godfather* have topped it in sales.

And besides selling 10 million copies, more than 60 million people watched the Peyton Place television soap opera, which starred Dorothy Malone, Mia Farrow and Ryan O'Neal.

Besides *Peyton Place*, Metalious also wrote *Return to Peyton Place*, *The Tight White Collar* and *No Adam in Eve*. None, however, was quite as successful as *Peyton Place*, the book that her publishers said "set the American public on its ear."

In retrospect, it was Metalious, more than anyone else, whose life was changed dramatically by *Peyton Place*.

Shortly after the book's publication, her husband, George, was fired from his job at Gilmanton Grammar School.

Although she claimed his firing stemmed from rumors she had written a "dirty book," school board members said their failure to renew his contract was a "personal

matter" and had nothing to do with *Peyton Place*.

But, Metalious said, "to a majority of people who live here, they suddenly decided that George is not the type to teach sweet, innocent children."

Shortly thereafter, Metalious divorced George, her high school sweetheart, and married a New Haven radio disc jockey, T. J. Martin. At the time of the announcement, Metalious said:

"I was married the first time at 17. It was far too young. It was much, much, much too young. I don't think the things you want when you are 17 are the things you want when you are 33, not by a damned site."

Within the next two years, Metalious divorced Martin, remarried George, and then separated from him again.

Little was heard from Metalious after that until February 1964, when she was rushed to a Boston hospital with a chronic liver ailment and died.

But the controversy over the woman, who once said she wrote *Peyton Place* because she was hungry, didn't end with her death.

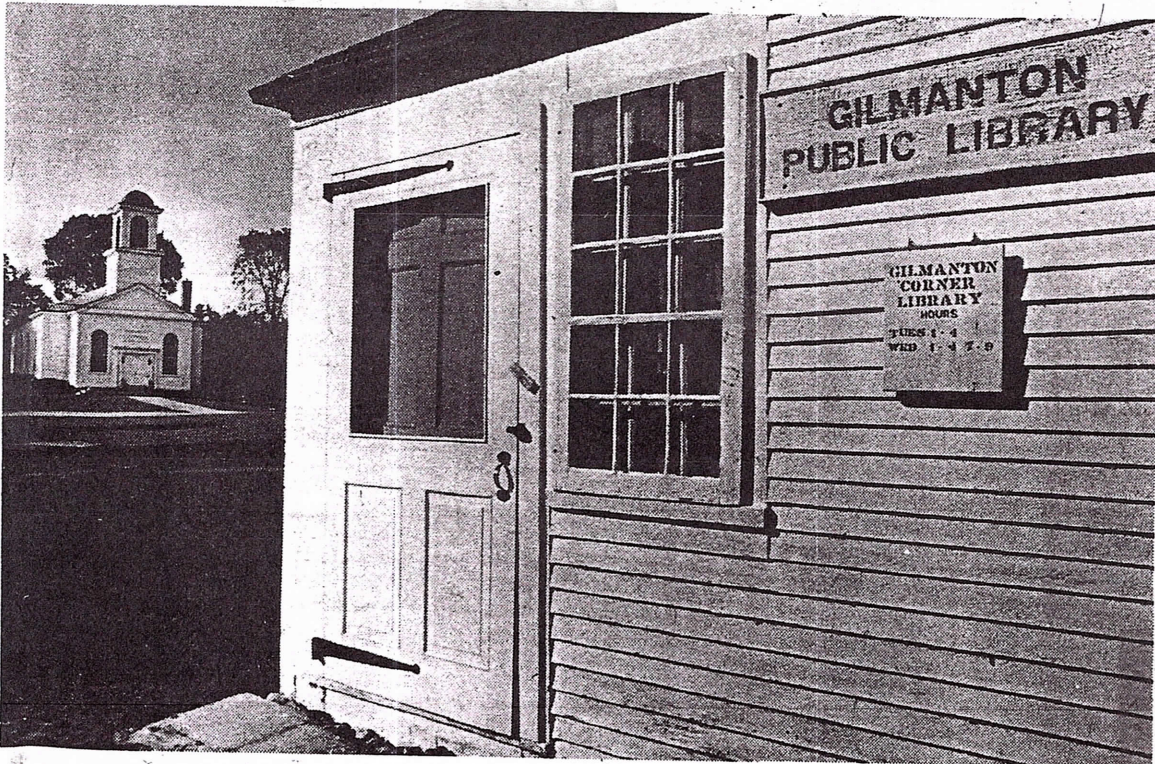
A new will found at her home left everything to a British journalist, John Rees, a man with whom she spent much of her last year. The will directed that she have no funeral and specified that she wanted her body to go to a medical school and her eyes to an eyebank.

The will was contested by her children and the New Hampshire State Supreme Court ordered that she be given a simple funeral. The service, attended by only family members and a few friends, was in Laconia. Her body was kept in a tomb there until the frozen ground of Smith Meeting House Cemetery thawed.

Toth said she learned during her research who the person was who has been putting flowers on Metalious's grave every year.

"I don't use his name in my book because I promised that I wouldn't. But I can say that he is a man and was in love with Grace," she said.

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The library sits across from the church and is... Monitor/Michele McDonald