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## The Virginian

*Owen Wister (1860 - 1938)*

Read by: Michelle Harris      Length: 14 hours and 25 minutes  
 Language: English      Style: Solo  
 Genre: Western Fiction

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*The Virginian*, written by Owen Wister and published in 1902, is widely considered to be the first genuine Western novel. In it we find the first examples of what have become archetypical Western characters and situations. A stranger arrives in Medicine Bow, Wyoming, and is met at the station by a tall, dark cowboy referred to only as “The Virginian”. Together they travel 263 miles to the ranch of Judge Henry, where the cowboy is employed as a ranch hand and later a foreman. Along the way the visitor, dubbed the “Tenderfoot”, comes to learn the ways of the West and appreciate the quiet dignity of his escort. We learn that the cowboy has a nemesis by the name of Trampas, a gambler who constantly attempts to provoke him, only to be met with a consistently reserved and high-minded response. There is a classic moment when the cowboy responds to an insult by Trampas by laying his pistol on the table and saying, “when you call me that, smile”. The cowboy is also enamored of Miss Molly Stark Wood, a

pretty, young schoolmarm from back east, with whom he is always the perfect gentleman and who he aims to make her “love him before we get through”. The story centers on the many incidents in the mythic life of the title character, replete with love, hate, action, violence, friendship and revenge, anchored by the emotional and moral burdens resulting from the hanging of a close friend, a cattle thief. The book is among the 50 all time best-sellers, has been adapted six times for films, and inspired the long-running NBC-TV series by the same name.

**Owen Wister** (July 14, 1860 – July 21, 1938) was an American writer often called the “father of western fiction and best known for his novel *The Virginian* (1902) and his biography of *Ulysses S. Grant* (1901). He was born in the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia; his father was a wealthy physician and his mother was the daughter of British actress Fanny Kemble. He attended St. Paul’s School and Harvard University, where he was an influential member of the Hasty Pudding Theatricals and of the exclusive Porcellian Club, where he met and became lifelong friends with Theodore Roosevelt. His first foray into writing was a parody of the *Swiss Family Robinson* entitled *The New Swiss Family Robinson*, which was well enough received that Mark Twain wrote him a letter of praise. After two year studying music he studied law at Harvard Law School and practiced thereafter in Philadelphia. He made several trips to the West, and, like his friend Roosevelt, developed a fascination with all things Western. After his sixth voyage west he gave up the law to write, mostly fiction about the western frontier. His masterpiece is *The Virginian*, the first serious novel about the west and the prototype of the fictional cowboy of books, films, and television; it was enormously successful, going through fourteen printings in eight months after release. His legacy includes the University of Wyoming literary magazine, *The Owen Wister Review*, and Mount Wister, a mountain on the western boundary of the Grand Teton National Park.