

# My father, the Cool Clean Hero

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GARY Cooper's bottom and long legs are back before the American eye. Nearly 40 years after the death of the star who defined the western in *The Virginian*, *The Plainsman* and *High Noon*, the ideal masculine rear-view has been hoisted, billboard-size, over New York City.

When the five-storey-high poster of Cooper was lifted above Sixth Avenue, we all stopped and stared. His image is being used to promote a brand of blue jeans, but that seemed almost beside the point. We stopped because it was a terrific photograph, one that screamed Real Movie Star!

Cooper was one of the original Hollywood icons, an all-American hero from a time before anyone had glanced at John Wayne or Clint Eastwood. He invented the rolling, stiff-from-the-saddle-style walk and defined the "Yup" and "Nope" delivery of the laconic cowboy.

It is startling to think that a man who can still advertise jeans was born in 1901, began his screen career in silent movies and had a red-hot affair with Clara Bow. As a boy, and known as plain Frank Cooper, he lived and rode in the Wild West when the West was still, just about, wild. His father had emigrated from England to Montana and become a judge in the days when cowboys drove cattle to railheads, and Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull still lived.

Cooper died in 1961, but his appeal today is as potent as it ever was during his lifetime. "Dad's not just history," says Maria Cooper Janis, daughter and only child of the actor. "He is contemporary and relevant."

To reflect that enduring relevance, she has published this month *Gary Cooper Off Camera: a Daughter Remembers*. This coffee-table book of photographs taken largely from the family album has an introduction by Tom Hanks in which he lauds Cooper as the first screen performer who seemed to act without acting, and as the original possessor of a "simple yet mysterious star quality".

*Off Camera* is no scandal-raker. It is more of a fluffy Hollywood pictorial with extended captions. Here is the family riding bicycles in the California sun, or setting off for the beach with surfboards. Here they are skiing, and celebrating Christmas in the Rocky Mountains. And here

they are mixing not just with fellow movie stars but with the likes of Picasso and novelist Ernest Hemingway, a true hunting, shooting and fishing buddy from the days when Cooper starred in *A Farewell to Arms*.

“My father's life was a life of images,” says Janis, “and these photos are images. They really do show the sort of life we lived at that time. A lot of my friends had much more volcanic childhoods. But I had an exceptionally good life.”

Her memories are of a world that was Eden-like as long as you took it at face value, like her photographs, and did not insist on peering too deeply behind the scenes. “Mystique was part of my father's attraction, and there is something very important about mystery,” she says. “Even if I told everything I know about him, there would still be a mystery, because that is part of who he was.”

The snake in the Garden of Eden, predictably enough, was Gary Cooper's prodigious sexual appetite. From his first days as a rising actor, when he would seduce the secretaries and production assistants to get close to the producers and directors, Cooper loved women and they loved him. His conquests were legendary: Tallulah Bankhead, Ingrid Bergman, Clara Bow, Marlene Dietrich, Carole Lombard and Mae West are simply the names that need the least looking-up 60 or 70 years later. There was also Velez Lupe, a Mexican “spitfire” who nearly did bring him down, not so much by scandal as by a pistol shot she fired at him as a parting word on a railway station. She missed. There was a European countess who took him off on a Grand Tour, and who is given credit for polishing his manners. Later, there was Grace Kelly.

Cooper, it was revealed years after his death, was beloved by women for both an innocent, shy charm and a staggering physical enthusiasm. Clara Bow, who once entertained an entire football team, said that only Cooper had ever left her sated. For all his verbal reticence he was famed among Hollywood ladies for wandering about naked in his dressing-rooms, ready for love between takes.

Surely Maria must have known something of all this? “Of course I was aware of it,” she says. “But as a family, we absorbed it, and dealt with it. The thing is that as a family, we really were close.”

There were days, many days, on which Cooper would hurry home from work, give her a big warm hug, and then lead his “girls” to the pool, or the beach, or on one of their cycling trips to the canyons above their mansion. There were others when he would simply go out, without explanation or excuse. There would be no comment in his wake.

“Sometimes both my parents would make clear to me the value of the old cliché don't do as I do, but do as I say. It implied, and I got this intuitively, that we are all human, that Dad was too, and we cannot always live up to our ideals. My parents were telling me that their erring was not a licence for me to rebel, or make the same mistakes.

“Mother takes a lot of credit. Instead of getting angry and nuzzling a Martini, she got on and ran a wonderful household, always organising things. Father was a star, and there was temptation. That was reality.”

Mother, who is now 86 and ailing at her home on Long Island, just laughed when biographers finally revealed her husband's Lothario ways 20 years after his death. Veronica Balfe, always known as Rocky, had, after all, been his only wife, and if Coop had strayed, at least he had always wandered home. Only once, according to Maria, did an affair really disrupt the happy home she pictures, and that was the one with actress Patricia Neal.

“I was 11 then, and very sensitive, and she seemed a real threat to our family,” she says.

Maria's favourite photograph of herself with Cooper was taken on the set of *High Noon*, his 1951 masterpiece. He is in full iconic dress the sheriff, with badge, waistcoat and black hat and is feeding a spoonful of ice-cream to his slender, pubescent daughter. She is looking down at the spoon, and he is looking into her face, tenderly. This is the picture on the book's cover.

It is also hanging in the entrance hall of her flat on New York's Park Avenue. The picture is one of the few obvious links to such an illustrious inheritance. There is another of her father, with a hunting dog, in a frame on the piano, and one showing her with Picasso, signed by the artist. This means a great deal to Maria, because she has devoted much of her life to painting, a talent she inherited from Cooper.

She has tried hard to follow her father's instructions to find her own way. He died when she was 23, and soon afterwards she made her way to New York with her mother, and plunged into the world of upper-class bohemia. She has been married to Byron Janis, a musician, for 33 years. She has a stepson, but has had no children of her own.

The flat is just a little forlorn. In the boom-boom 1990s, Park Avenue means marble and millionaires and limousines, but this is one of those old classic spreads with creaky floors, flickering lamps and chipped mirrors in the 1930s bathrooms.

The Steinway baby grand that dominates the sitting-room is home to the ghosts of old Hollywood glory. It is one of the few treasures Maria has left from her childhood home, and its ivories were once tinkled by Dean Martin as Frank Sinatra draped himself over its gracious curves and crooned alongside Judy Garland. Maria looks a little misty-eyed at the memories.

Does she ever regret turning away from her Hollywood inheritance? Well, she answers, the nearest she ever got to acting was playing the Statue of Liberty, silently, in the school play. “And I did not think,” she says vehemently, “that it was a life that seemed to bring a hell of a lot of happiness.” There is a silence. Maria purses her mouth, as if regretting the remark. And I am left wondering what might have happened if she had taken a longer look behind the images of those happy family photographs. Perhaps she is wiser not to, perhaps sometimes it is better to take images of heroes, and fathers, at face value.

Charles Laurence. This article first appeared in *The Daily Telegraph*.