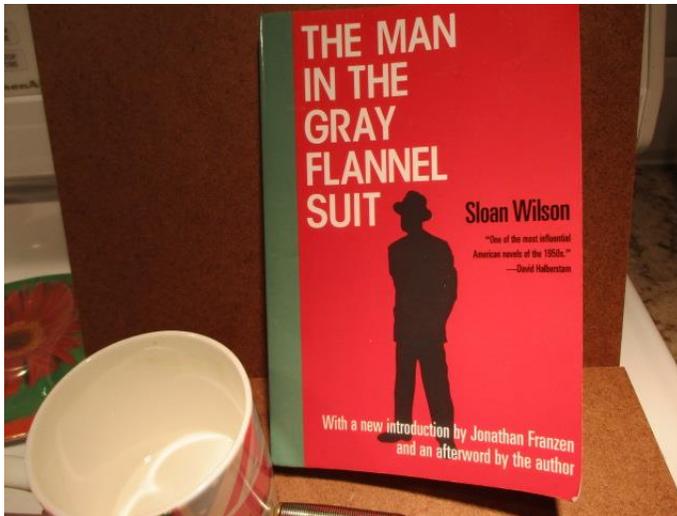


The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit

By Rod Fraser



Although this book was written in the 1950s, I only read it recently. I had heard of it. In my early adult years, it was a book more talked about than read (at least in my circles). I suspected it was a dull story of the post-war corporate world that celebrated the mass conformity of those years.

Nothing could be further from the truth. This is a wonderful book. Far from being a story of a corporate conformist, safely ensconced in a suburb near New York City, it is story of a soldier, an officer in the paratroopers, who finds civilian life in the

post-war years just as terrifying as the army — as he comes to terms with his career, marriage and the never ending need for money to pay for repairs on his house, buy a badly needed new car, and look after all the other financial needs of his family.

The book sold over 2 million copies, and a subsequent film adaptation in 1956, starring Gregory Peck and Jennifer Jones, was also a critical and financial success.

The Los Angeles Times, on the occasion of Sloan Wilson's death in 2003, claimed his novel's "greatness may be that it still sparks meaningful discussions over quality of life versus monetary success, almost half a century after it was written."

Before I go on to tell you about the author and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, here is one more comment about the book in *The Atlantic* (written in 2010):

*"If you believe in love and loyalty and truth and justice, you may finish reading *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, as I did, with tears in your eyes."*

"But even as your heart is melting, you may feel annoyed ... [when] Wilson asks you to believe that if a man will only show true courage and honesty, he'll be offered a perfect job within walking

distance of his home, the local real-estate developer won't cheat him, the local judge will dispense perfect justice, the inconvenient villain will be sent packing, the captain of industry will reveal his decency and civic spirit, the local electorate will vote to tax itself more heavily for the sake of schoolchildren, the former lover overseas will know her place and not make any trouble, and the martini-drenched marriage will be saved."



Sloan Wilson (1920–2003), the author of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, was born in Norwalk, Connecticut, graduated from Harvard in 1942, and served as an officer in the Coast Guard during World War Two, where he commanded a naval trawler for the Greenland patrol, and then later an army supply ship in the Pacific.

After the war, Wilson worked as a journalist for Time-Life and began to write stories for *The New Yorker*. He wrote his first novel in 1947 and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* was published in 1955. In total, he wrote 15 books. Two of them were made into motion pictures. Later, he taught at the State University of New York in Buffalo.

Wilson spent much of his later adult life living on a boat, first in Florida and then later in Virginia. He

was an alcoholic and suffered from Alzheimer's disease in his later years. He died at the age of 83. Of all his published work, he had two bestsellers: *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *A Summer Place*. The latter book was also made into a movie, starring Troy Donahue and Sandra Dee.

The title of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is curious. It refers to the 'uniform' that a successful man in the 1950s was expected to wear—not unlike the uniforms that soldiers and sailors wore in the war years. It has become a tired metaphor to characterize the alleged conformity of the fifties. Here is how Sloan Wilson described the reaction to his book (and the title):

"I had a good story to tell about the problems my generation faced when we came home from World War II. To my surprise, my novel ... was taken by some serious thinkers as a protest against the conformity and the rigors of suburban life...."

"[Nothing could be further from the truth], the main problem which concerned Tom Rath [the hero of my book] was that he felt the world was driving him to be a workaholic" and he didn't want that. Together with his impressive wife, Betsy, they charted a course that avoided that trap.

At the end of the novel, I made Tom Rath feel a lot more confident about his future than might be

warranted. I make no apologies for that. Tom went through a tough war and a difficult return to civilian life. "I'm glad I gave him a few momentary triumphs."



The novel tells the story of Tom Rath, a man in his thirties with a wife and three children. They live in Westport, Connecticut. It is mid-1953. At lunch one day, Tom's friend, Bill Hawthorne, mentioned a job opening in public relations at United Broadcasting Corporation.

Tom thought about the possibility of this new job. If he could get it, he might be able to earn more money—perhaps as much as ten thousand a year. With that kind of income, he and his wife, Betsy, might be able to buy a better house.

Tom was currently working for a charitable foundation, as assistant to the director. His grandmother, a well-connected woman in the community, had recommended him for the job when he got out of the army in 1946.

His job was respectable, challenging and Tom enjoyed his coworkers. But it paid seven thousand a year and that just wasn't enough to pay the bills (let alone move to a better house in a decent neighborhood). After discussing the job offer with Betsy, and

being interviewed numerous times, Tom accepts the job and is immediately asked to work on a speech to be delivered by the CEO of United Broadcasting to a group of physicians in two or three months' time.

Tom wrestles with his options. He is fearful of being fired from his job, of not measuring up. He debates whether to be candid with his boss and tell him the truth about the mental health initiative and the speech he is working on — or to lie and finesse his way into his employer's good graces.

When Tom discusses this with Betsy, she is appalled. Of course, he should speak up and be a man. He didn't spend the war as an officer in the paratroopers by being timid and fearful. He jumped into the dark of night, hoping for the best, and determined he should do his damndest to stay alive, lead his men and do his duty. Why should civilian life be any different?

Tom considers all this, and "lowers his stress level before the big meeting by telling himself with a shrug, 'It doesn't matter'—a phrase he often used throughout the war, before parachuting from a plane or killing an enemy soldier."

In short, he puts his job on the line and tells his boss what he thinks. It seems to work. Over time, his employer starts to trust his advice. By the end of the book, his job is secure and other aspects of his

life are falling into place.

Although this is primarily a story about Tom Rath, it is also a story of his indomitable wife, Betsy. She supports her husband full-heartedly in his career and life goals. She encourages him to take measured risks. She also shows her entrepreneurial talent when Tom inherits an old manor house from his grandmother.

Under Betsy's careful guidance, she rescues her family from financial ruin with a well-thought out proposal to subdivide the property and sell it as individual lots.

But the most touching part of the book is Tom's realization that his affair with Maria (in Rome during the war) has given him a son. He is determined to provide financially for the boy, but will not do it without Betsy's consent. This is another challenge for this couple.

Tom is forced to disclose his affair with Maria and ask for forgiveness. In so doing, he explains all his feelings and fears about the war years, which he had never shared with Betsy. Although she is devastated at this news, these confessions and stories somehow bring this couple closer together.

This is a wonderful book, a touching look at the 1950s and the 'Greatest Generation', with all its

fears, foibles and successes. What an irony that the return to postwar America could, in many respects, be just as terrifying as jumping from an airplane in full combat gear in the dark of night.

For those who watched the early episodes of *Mad Men* on television, you will recall Don Draper had a similar military background (albeit in Korea) and the story line follows his path to a corporate career in New York City, a path similar to *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. If you liked *Mad Men*, you'll be sure to love this book.

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