

The Man from Skibbereen: A Novel

By Louis L'Amour

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Crispin Mayo was a reckless young brawler who'd left his tiny fishing village for the vast American frontier. Headed west to join a railroad construction crew, he came upon an isolated station—and a mystery. The shack was abandoned, but fresh blood spattered the floor, and the telegraph was clicking away unattended. When Mayo stepped inside and put a hand on the telegraph key, he had no way of knowing the course of his life would change forever—and that he would become entangled with a band of Civil War veterans with a score to settle against the government…and a feisty young woman who'd risk anything to save the people she loved. Cris Mayo, who had never backed away from a fight in his life, was about to have his courage put to the ultimate test.

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The Man from Skibbereen: A Novel By Louis L'Amour Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #177459 in Books
- Brand: Bantam
- Published on: 1983-06-01
- Released on: 1983-06-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.86" h x .70" w x 4.19" l,
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 256 pages

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Editorial Review

From the Inside Flap
Crispin Mayo was a stranger to the law of the gun. He had come west from Ireland to seek his fortune--one man with nothing but his fists to protect him. What he found instead was trouble. A cutthroat band of Confederate renegades were planning a train kidnapping. It was none of Mayo's business--until the desperate plea of a lady changed his mind. Soon the diehard rebels would be very sorry indeed they'd ever crossed paths with the lone man from Skibbereen.

About the Author
Louis L’Amour is undoubtedly the bestselling frontier novelist of all time. He is the only author in history to receive both the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and the Congressional Gold Medal in honor of his life's work. He has published ninety novels; twenty-seven short-story collections; two works of nonfiction; a memoir, **Education of a Wandering Man**; and a volume of poetry, **Smoke from This Altar**. There are more than 300 million copies of his books in print worldwide.

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Chapter One

Crispin Mayo had a wish to walk the high land with the company of eagles and the shadow of clouds, so he strode away to Bantry Bay and shipped aboard a windjammer as an able-bodied seaman. It was his first voyage on such a vessel, although he had fished upon deep water since childhood, and knew a marlinspike from a hickory fid before he was six.

He jumped his ship in Boston Town and hied himself off along the dark streets, trusting no man and steering a course sheer of grog shops and the painted girls who lay traps for trusting sailormen.

When the dawning came upon him he was beyond the city's streets and walking along country lanes with stone walls to left and right like there'd been at home in County Cork. He stayed shy of main-traveled roads for fear that if they found him they'd ship him home again, and he'd yet to see a mountain. So he begged a meal here, chopped wood for one there, and slept by the night in a haystack or a farmer's barn. And after sleeping in the barn, if he had an egg or two of the farmer's chickens, who is to blame him for that? After all, a large-shouldered Irish lad comes easy upon hunger.

He had no blackthorn stick, so he cut one of oak from a fallen branch with a fine heft to it that lay handy to the road. If only one man came for him, or even two, he'd be after tearin' down their meathouse with his fists, but if they came against him in numbers the stick might be handy. Crossing a pasture once a bull came upon him, a bull with no taste for the singing of Ballinascarty songs, but he laid the bull flat with a blow between the horns and went his way a-singing.

Somebody said while he listened that in a westward land they were building a railroad, and paying strong lads for the driving of steel, so he went that way and a hiring-man put him on a train. He sat royally upon the cushions then, and west he went with Paddy Gallagher, Tommy O'Brien and Mick Shannon riding beside him, bound for the end of track, wherever that might be, and nobody caring the least.

The houses thinned out and the villages disappeared and when they had ridden the night through and day was

come they were crossing a vast plain of grass, with the blue sky above and the train chugging down a fresh-laid track into a newborn land.

All day they rode, and through the night and the day again, seeing only the grass, the sky, and far in the distance some woolly black cows, until a time came when the train clanked and squealed to a stop. The man in the blue suit and cap got down and walked slowly forward along the track toward a small building painted a dull red.

It was very hot, very still, and the black flies buzzed about. Cris Mayo stepped down to stretch his legs and saw shade, so he walked yonder and sat beneath a cottonwood; and there the leaves brushed together, whispering stories to the wind, and Cris Mayo closed his eyes, liking the smell of the sun upon the grass and the sound of a trickle of water from somewhere close. He would get a drink before he boarded the train again, but first he would sit quiet for a moment. Far off he could hear voices calling in the shack, he heard the conductor swear, and sometime along there he closed his eyes, just for a bit.

He opened them suddenly to a shrill whistle blowing, heard the grind of the train starting and came swiftly to his feet, sprinting for the track. He went up the slight bank, his feet slipped on the gravel, and he fell. The train was gathering speed. Swearing, he ran, but a fast forty rods only left him panting and the train disappearing, slowly drawing into itself with distance and the narrowing track.

He stood staring and alone. Only the twin rails before and behind him, and the sky and grass large all about. He trudged down the track, walking back to the small station, a box of a place with a signal pole before it and a sidetrack alongside the main line.

He wondered why they laid the ties so that a man could not walk upon them decently, but had to go a step and a half and then a step or so . . . arrah, a bothersome thing!

It was hot, and there was nothing about but a bird, a meadow lark somebody had said; but with a fine sound to it, not like any lark he had heard, yet lovely still.

The station was there, two windows facing him with blank eyes and a closed door--why, in God's name, on such a hot day? He called out, but no one answered, his voice falling empty away from the dull red wall.

Under his hand the door opened, and he spoke inquiringly into the room. A telegraph key chattered, chattered like the teeth of a frightened banshee. He walked in, leaving the door standing, but nobody was there, the room was empty. It looked empty, it felt empty, it was empty. The second room, for sleeping: also empty.

The bed was unmade. How his old grandmother would have gone on about that, the middle of the day and the bed not made! A shocking thing, not to be believed.

There was the station room with a bench for sitting, there was the bedroom with the unmade bed and a homemade washstand, and some old clothes on pegs. He stepped through the back door and stopped of a sudden, for there was the darkness of a stain on the stoop there, a stain of blood.

Blood looks much the same when spilled in Skibbereen or in Boston or on the western plains, and Cris Mayo had seen a bit of blood in his time. Something or somebody had bled here, bled a sight more than was good for him. Yet when his eyes looked beyond there was nothing but the wide waving grass and the sky over it, with them meeting yonder, far off.

All that empty land, he thought, and not a potato planted. A dreadful waste of soil. He went back within: a snug place for all it was only a shack, and built well against the winter to come. The instrument clicked angrily but he knew nothing of its operation. There was a chair beside it, and papers strewn all about the tiny desk with a pencil laid down as if the owner had just stepped away.

Was there anybody here at all, then? Or had they found him injured and taken him aboard the train? What had happened to the man? Had he hurt himself, or been attacked? This was not Ireland, and Cris was a far piece from Clonakilty. There might be things here, deadly things, of which he did not know.

The key was chattering, so he went to it and put his finger on it and chattered right back at them, a wild burst and then another.

Silence--utter, astonished silence.

Then the machine erupted into a wild crescendo of sound, a quick, excited racket. When it was silent again, he touched the key just once.

A short volley of clicks, then silence. He touched the key again.

At least they knew that someone was here. When he was discovered missing from the train, they would surely know it was he who was at the station; yet would they come in time?

For the first time he thought of eating and drinking. There must be something here, for the station agent or whatever he was called had to have supplies. He went into the bedroom and looked for food.

It was there, of course. A couple of sides of bacon, a ham, jerked beef, dried apples, some coffee, flour . . . and there was a stove and a lamp. In the station room there had also been a couple of red lanterns. He wouldn't lack for light.

He was getting up from peering into the lower part of the food box when he saw the rifle. It was on the floor, half under the bed. He picked it up carefully. It was almost new. When he worked the lever, it ejected a spent shell. There was a spot of blood on the floor near where the gun had lain, and what appeared to be blood on the stock.

Building a fire in the stove, he made coffee, fried a dozen pieces of bacon, found some stale biscuits, and ate, sitting by the window with his eyes on the empty grass out there. When he had finished and washed the cup and plate, he tapped the key again. At once it sprang to life, chattering away with a will. It seemed to be asking questions, but he had no idea of how to answer, save with the single click.

The sun was sinking, the sky a glory of color, the grass ablaze with red.

He thought of the patch of blood by the back door and the vanished telegrapher. Snatches of conversation overheard on the train returned to trouble him. There was supposed to have been a signal on the pole near the track, and there had been none.

He went to the door and looked down the track. Nothing. The twin rails merged and vanished. Right in front of the station there was a sidetrack that would take about two dozen cars; a small plank platform; a bench against the station wall. Sitting on the bench was a square box he had not noticed until now. He recalled seeing it in the car near where the brakeman sat. He tested the weight: heavy.

Picking it up, he carried it into the station and put it down on the floor. Using a hammer that lay there with a few other tools, he opened the box.

Ammunition. Bullets for the rifle.

It was growing dark inside, yet he hesitated to light a lamp. What was out there? Was there anything?

Indians?

The boys on the train had talked about them. Likely to scalp a man, they said, big, ugly devils, they said, all painted and screeching. They'd come sneaking through the grass with bows, arrows and tomahawks. Maybe the boys had only been trying to scare him. He wasn't afraid of any bloody red devils, not him. Not Crispin Mayo who had whipped those three lads from Dublin, whipped them all at once, and with bare fists. Thrashed them good, he had. And all because of a girl from Baltimore, that little seaport down the coast from his home in County Cork.

He filled his cup again. The sun was gone, the sky was streaked with sullen red. A wind blew over the grass, a wind with the smell of far-off. He wondered what was out there, over the distant rim of the world from which the long wind blew.

If he could work that instrument, he might get them to send a train for him. A train? For one Irish immigrant? Ah, not likely, that.

He took up the rifle again, handling it gingerly. He had never fired a rifle, although he had heard much talk of it, had been told all about it by an uncle who had served in the French Army, and who, when drunk, persisted in going through all the instruction he had been given in the use of firearms. Cris heard it over and over, but whether Uncle Pat knew what he was talking about, he had no idea.

How had Cris Mayo gotten into this fix, anyway? From fighting. Restlessness, fighting, and a blue-eyed girl with freckles on her nose. After he'd walloped the three Dubliners, he'd gone down to Skibbereen and fought the two O'Sullivans. Broad, fine lads they were, and quick with their fists, but not so quick as himself, nor so strong.

He battered them, and all in good fun, too, but when he returned to his job he was discharged.

Oh, he had seen that coming! They wanted to be rid of him from the moment he walked out with Barney Kinsella's daughter, her that another had set his eyes upon. They wished him gone, so when the excuse offered, they sent him packing.

He'd started in to fish the waters off the Old Head of Kinsale, Rosscarbery, and the Bay of Glandore, to fish very seriously indeed; and it was the selling of fish that allowed him to put by a bit to start him on his own way.

A rough enough time he had of it until he found himself aboardship. Then he'd been all right, because he was quick with his hands and a good man at rigging, splicing or handling sail; but most of the boys along the shores of Kerry or Cork could have done as well.

Now he was alone here, in this far land, marooned in a tiny telegraph shack beside a railroad that went to nowhere. Westward they were laying track across the wide prairie, but the only place before them that he'd

heard of was Hell-on-Wheels, the moving town at the end of the tracks. No, there was a fort, too, somewhere out there. He forgot its name.

Black outside now . . . it was black with a storm coming and no stars. Leaves rustled and the grass bent before the wind. A sudden burst of that wind slammed against the walls and lightning flashed, once and again. Peering out the back window, he saw the rain coming in a solid wall, and something . . . something else was there!

Lightning flared once more. Something ghastly and white! Something rain-wet and walking, walking straight and stiff toward the shack! The blackness closed in and Cris Mayo stared, his throat gripped with superstitious terror. The lightning flamed, a sharp wicked stroke that struck somewhere near, and in its brightness the white thing lay sprawled on the grass not twenty feet from the shack: clearly, in that instant, a naked man.

Fear forgotten, Cris Mayo slammed open the door and lunged across the stoop into the storm. Wind whipped at him, smashed his breath back down his throat, lashed him with sheets of rain. Head down, he plunged the few yards to the fallen man and his hands grasped the wet, cold body, half-dragging, half-carrying it in through the door. As he dropped it, a flare of lightning showed him what seemed two bulletholes, black and round, in the man's body.

Shoving hard, he forced the door shut against the wind, and stood a moment to catch his breath. Then he struck a light and held it to the lamp's wick. Replacing the chimney, he carried the lamp into the room where the bed was, then returned for the man.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Ronald Stauffer:

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