

The Story

The *Gentleman from Indiana* is a classic love story between a small town community filled with anything but small people and a lost city boy searching for meaning in his life. John Harkless arrives in the fictional town of Plattville, Indiana, with his post-graduate dreams squashed. He has little to his name other than the ownership of the town's "poor, poor paper." After taking a courageous stand against a crooked politician, Harkless turns the failing Carlow County *Herald* into a success read throughout the region.

Although Harkless's time in Plattville has won him many friends, his outspoken nature has also given him a collection of enemies, namely the **Whitecaps**, a band of devious citizens whose disregard for the law is infamous in Plattville. These criminals make routine attempts on Harkless's life, causing the citizens of Plattville to do their part to guard him. In a twist of fate, the Whitecaps introduce Harkless to Helen Sherwood when she saves him from their gunfire, and the two fall instantly in love. The affair is cut short when Helen breaks the news that her family is going abroad. In a fit of anger and disappointment, Harkless goes missing in a storm.

With Harkless lost and many of his Whitecap enemies at large, the town fears the worst. Their fears are confirmed when Harkless is discovered severely injured and in critical condition. While Harkless recovers in the hospital, his paper spirals downward—that is until a relative of Harkless's closest friend and colleague volunteers for the position of temporary editor-in-chief of the *Herald*, saving the paper and mystifying Harkless. However, this stranger has surprising plans for both Harkless and his paper that might mean the end of Harkless's days in Plattville. ★

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Exploring...

A MASTERWORK OF MIDWESTERN ROMANCE FROM
OUR PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING *NATIVE SON*.

A WONDERFUL TALE OF SMALL-TOWN
LIFE – REMINISCENT OF ALL THAT'S
GOOD ABOUT LIVING IN INDIANA.

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THE GENTLEMAN FROM INDIANA

BY JAMES STILL

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James Still's Adaptation

Booth Tarkington was one of the nation's most popular authors during the early 20th century. His first novel, *The Gentleman from Indiana*, is a love letter to his native state. James Still, the IRT's playwright-in-residence, has adapted the novel for the stage with a cast of 17, using a wide range of literary techniques. Still has combined and eliminated characters and rearranged events in order to be faithful to the spirit of Tarkington's work while reducing the story to a reasonable stage length. Some of the dialogue is Tarkington's own; some is Still's creation. In telling the story, Still enlisted many of Tarkington's characters to be narrators as well as participants in the drama. Letters and telegrams are important elements in the story; Still has transformed some of these missives into dialogue scenes, while others are read aloud on stage as they are written or received. For scenes where characters read from the Carlow County *Herald*, Still has used actual 19th-century headlines from Indiana newspapers he found in the **Workingmen's Institute**, the public library in New Harmony, Indiana. ★

Booth Tarkington: Our Amiable Uncle

Known as “your Amiable Uncle” and a true “Gentleman from Indiana” Booth

Tarkington wrote for the people of Indiana. He was born in Indianapolis on July 29, 1869, the second and last child of John Tarkington, a lawyer, and his wife Elizabeth (Booth) Tarkington. His family’s downtown home and most of his father’s livelihood were swept away by an economic depression in 1873, forcing the family to move to a smaller house on New York Street. Two years later as the country was recovering from the depression, Mr. Tarkington’s practice began to flourish once more. The happy family built a larger home at 1100 North Pennsylvania Street. Young Booth led a privileged life, complete with live-in servants and all the other amenities his father’s large salary could afford.

In his youth, Tarkington found comfort in his father’s library. He became a voracious reader, excelling in scholastic achievements. After attending **Purdue University** for a year, Tarkington transferred to **Princeton**, where he studied for two years. Without receiving his degree, Tarkington returned home to Indiana and began to devote himself to writing. Over the next five years he wrote ***The Gentleman from Indiana*** as well as ***Monsieur Beaucaire*** and numerous short stories and plays, receiving stacks of rejection letters from various editors.

He began writing *Gentleman* almost immediately after leaving school, drawing inspiration from a visit to Marshall, Illinois, on his twelfth birthday. This “sleepy country village in the heart of the flatlands west of the Wabash River” became the fictional Plattville, Indiana, that is the setting for Tarkington’s novel. For the author, the small town symbolized

the timeless perfection of a boy’s heaven where “people lived happily in the world spun around them and the visiting city boy roamed the dusty streets and adjacent fields in bare-foot happiness.” The town’s annual “show day,” his cousin’s interest in a printing press, and the publication of a small paper parallel events in *The Gentleman from Indiana*.



Tarkington wrote 40,000 words in a few short months before the narrative came to a screeching halt. Tarkington describes his writer’s block: “It wouldn’t budge. The hero stuck fast in the middle of the walk he was taking—he wouldn’t take another step.” Tarkington put the novel on hold until the death of an old Princeton friend, John Cleve Green, gave him the push he needed to finish. Tarkington’s closest schoolmate, Green had always been his subconscious model for the gentleman protagonist Harkless. The novel soon became a memorial to his friend.

From spring to autumn of 1898, Tarkington worked to set down the story he discovered had been in his

head all along. The novel was shortened and published as a serial in *McClure’s Magazine*, as well as published in its entirety in book form. It was a best seller.

After gaining notoriety in the literary world with the success of his first novel, Tarkington continued to write and was published numerous times in *McClure’s* and other magazines. He wrote 171 stories, 9 novellas, 21 novels, and 19 plays. In 1902 he married Louisa Fletcher, and, in an act of life imitating art, he was placed on the local ballot for the **Indiana Legislature**. Without running any campaign, he won the election; but a severe case of typhoid fever forced his political career to an abrupt end.

After he regained his health, Tarkington’s interests turned toward the dramatic, with the staging of several of his plays. Four dramatic failures and the unexpected death of his mother, coupled with prolonged travel that separated him from his wife and newborn daughter, dampened his mood severely. The strain of a failing marriage and a decrease in his creative output to virtually nothing led to an increase in his alcohol consumption. He struggled through divorce in 1911 in this downward spiral.

(above left)
Tarkington at 28,
when he was writing
The Gentleman
from Indiana.

(right)
Tarkington at the
height of his fame,
around the time
Alice Adams was
published in 1921.



At the beginning of 1912, Tarkington began to recover from his problem with alcohol, and by the end of the year he married his second wife, Susanah Robinson. The following year Tarkington published the first of the ***Penrod*** stories that launched him into the world of juvenile fiction. This collection reflected his interest in how the mind of a boy works. As research for his tales of a boy’s life, he became absorbed in the activities of his nephews, reflected in the series of letters he sent to them during his travels abroad, all signed “Your Amiable Uncle.”

In the following years he published two **Pulitzer Prize**–winning novels: ***The Magnificent Ambersons*** (1919) and ***Alice Adams*** (1922). Later in his life his health began to systematically fail him. In 1930 he lost the use of his eyes completely. After several surgeries, his sight was restored, and he continued to write for children until his death in 1946. More than 5 million copies of Tarkington’s works were sold in the first half of the twentieth century, making him one of Indiana’s most famous and beloved authors. ★

Other Indiana Authors

Learn more about these famous writers on line or at your library.

Lew Wallace (1827-1905)
Ben-Hur

James Whitcomb Riley (1849-1916)
Poet: “The Frost Is on the Punkin”

Gene Stratton-Porter (1863-1924)
Freckles, ***Girl of the Limberlost***

Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945)
Sister Carrie

Ernie Pyle (1900-1945)
World War II Correspondent

Jessamyn West (1902-1984)
The Friendly Persuasion

Kurt Vonnegut (1922-)
Slaughterhouse-Five
A Man without a Country

Mari Evans (1923-)
Poet: ***A Dark and Splendid Mass***

Jean Sheppard (1929-1999)
In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash (film: ***A Christmas Story***)

Scott Russell Sanders (1946-)
Essayist: ***A Private History of Awe***



Further Reading: Tarkington’s Penrod Stories

The *Penrod* Stories are perhaps Tarkington’s most famous and beloved pieces of literature. Comparable to Huckleberry Finn or Tom Sawyer, Tarkington’s main character, Penrod Schofield, lives the life of an average boy searching for adventure, squirming away from authority, and dreading any encounter with Marjorie Jones. The collection of three novels: *Penrod*, *Penrod and Sam*, and *Penrod Jashber* have been acclaimed by adults and children alike. ★

Websites to Explore

<http://www.northern.edu/hastingsw/journhist.html>
History of journalism

<http://www.smalltownpapers.com/>
Archive of newspapers from small towns all over the country

<http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu/news/19thpaper.html>
Article about 19th-century small-town newspapers

<http://moa.cit.cornell.edu/moa/index.html>
Searchable digital library of primary sources in American social history from the antebellum period through Reconstruction; includes newspaper articles from different periods

Items in **bold** throughout the study guide make excellent study topics.

Discussion Questions

What in Harkless's character makes him a gentleman? What is admirable about him? What is not admirable?

What does the sense of community in the town tell you about the people of Plattville? Think of the communities you are in; how do they support you like family?

How does the play confirm or deny the idea of a stereotypical small town? In what ways does Plattville differ from how you think of a small town? How is Plattville different from Indianapolis or other cities?

Writing Activities

Imagine you are a citizen of Plattville working for the Carlow County *Herald*. Write an article or editorial about the events of the play from an insider's viewpoint.

Write a news article about an event in your life or among your family or friends. Include the who, what, when, where, how, and why.

Write a review of your experience at the IRT seeing *The Gentleman from Indiana*. Talk about the play, the story, the actors, the staging, the audience, and the theatre space.

Harkless stresses the importance of honesty in politics. What about our governmental system demands honesty? Research recent political scandals, local or national. What happens when there is dishonesty in politics?

In what ways do both Helen and Harkless attempt to hide or escape from their roots? In what ways are their actions hurtful to themselves or others? How do their opinions on their origins change throughout the course of the play?

What role does Helen fulfill in this play? How is she different from the other women in the play? How does Helen compare to women today?

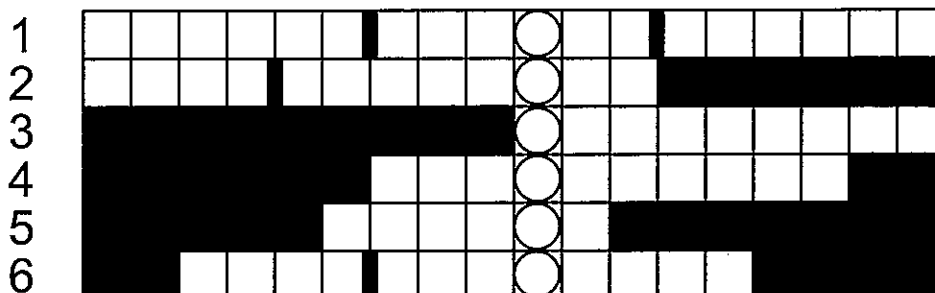
In this play, what role does journalism play in revealing truths? How does journalism help to move the plot forward? How can these ideas be connected to journalism in the real world?

As you watch the play, think about the role of the narrators in the story. What do Miss Selina, Tom Martin, and the other townspeople add to the story? How do their different voices and points of view influence the way the story is presented to you? Can you think of other plays where a narrator plays a key role?

Word Puzzle

Fill in the answers. The circled letters spell Booth Tarkington's real first name.

1. Name of a "poor, poor paper."
2. Who is the gentleman from Indiana?
3. Troublemakers who stalk the editor.
4. Where it all happens.
5. Hero of Tarkington's children's books.
6. Indiana's most famous living author.



www.irtlive.com

e:mail • indianarep@indianarep.com

140 West Washington Street,
Indianapolis, Indiana 46204-3465

Janet Allen, Artistic Director

Study Guide written by Katelyn Coyne
Edited & Designed by Richard J Roberts
Contributors: Katie Norton, Millicent Wright

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Upcoming Student Matinees

Huckleberry Finn

Monday-Friday, September 27 - November 4

A Christmas Carol

November 1-3, 6-10, 13-17, 20-22, 28-30
December 1, 5-8, 12-15

*I Have Before Me a Remarkable Document
Given to Me by a Young Lady from Rwanda*
November 22, 28, 29; December 6, 7, 13

Gem of the Ocean

January 23, 25, 30, 31; February 6, 7

Twelfth Night

Monday-Friday, January 24 - March 2

Death of a Salesman

March 6, 7, 8, 13, 20, 21

Bad Dates

March 21, 28, 29; April 3, 4, 18

The Unexpected Guest

April 17, 18, 19, 20, 24, 25, 26; May 1

Questions or comments?

Call the IRT Education Department at
317-916-4844 or 916-4841