

On Making a Film of *Jack London's Martin Eden*

By Jay Craven

I chose to make *Martin Eden* because Jack London has always interested me, for his vivid writing, social engagement, complex humanism and the textured emotions of his characters. I was also drawn to London's own volatile life and his legendary status as America's first "celebrity writer" whose work inspired Ernest Hemingway, Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck, Jack Kerouac, Sinclair Lewis, Norman Mailer and Susan Sontag, among others.

Martin Eden tells the story of a poor and unschooled sailor (Eden), who unexpectedly meets Ruth Morse, a magnetic young woman of means and education. Their unconventional attraction upends both lives and propels timely themes of impossible love, pursuit of the American Dream, dogged individualism, and what can be an ultimately depressing quest for a comfortable place in an inconstant world.

I liked how London explores dynamics of social class and weaves the story around his own autobiography. After all, London claims in his novel *John Barleycorn*, "I was Martin Eden." London seemed to excavate his own conflicted quests and outcomes through Eden, whose idealistic pursuit of his single-minded goals, and his hard work to transform himself, ultimately leaves him emotionally stranded, unable to return to his roots or find sustenance in his "success." Twenty years before it emerged as an articulated philosophy, London probed modern man's existential dilemma.

A largely self-educated man, Jack London teased out autobiographical elements in this story but maybe never dug quite deep enough to fully unearth the painful contradictions and demons that haunted him. *Martin Eden* remains an enigma and his mystery appeals to me. Still, London provided plenty of bases for our own investigations and projections.

I say "our" investigation because I developed and produced this project in association with 35 students from a dozen colleges, including Wellesley, Mount Holyoke, Skidmore, Hamilton, Augsburg University, Connecticut College, Northern Vermont University, Middlebury College, Colby-Sawyer and Hampshire College.

Mentored by 27 professionals, students played substantial roles in every aspect of production, from casting, script development and costume design to sound recording, location scouting and script supervising. They also built sets – from scratch – including one for an early 20th century laundry and another for a New England tenement duplex. Eighteen students participated in the research and writing of the first draft screenplay that other students later critiqued and revised, under my direction. 18 more advanced the film's post-production, using the cut developed by 10 students during our winter/spring intensive. Students also appear on screen, as featured extras and in several supporting roles. Their fingerprints are everywhere in the film.

Born in 1876, the year of Little Big Horn, Custer's Last Stand and Alexander Graham Bell's patent for the telephone, Jack London's life mirrored the turbulent times he inhabited, as America lurched forward from the Civil War, a rural frontier and the eradication of Indigenous resistance into a modern world shaped by growing industrialization; cultural modernism; race, class and gender inequality – and still more war, when the United States joined the devastating, contentious and controversial European conflict of World War I.

Jack London wrote twenty-three novels, three memoirs and hundreds of short stories and poems, but he died young, at the age of 40. Through his protagonist, Martin Eden, London reveals his own attraction to wealth and material comfort, his relentless struggle for recognition in the face of constant rejection, his political restlessness and discontent - and his ambivalence about wealth and success, once achieved.

Eden develops a voracious bent for learning, encouraged by a local librarian, and a quest for status, made apparent through his impulsive love for Ruth Morse that leads him into the gilded parlors of the upper middle class – but only as a tourist. Scholar Sam Baskett describes how “again and again Martin returns to his desire to unite his “knowledge” that which he knows through his “reason” – and his dream, that which he knows through his imagination.”¹

Ruth propels Eden's dream and sparks his imagination, to the point that he loses touch with what is real. It's ironic when, late in the film, Eden dismisses Brissenden's idea of socialism as nothing but a dream – after Eden has blinded himself to all else, in pursuit of his own fantasy of Ruth and what she represents to him.

When, by a fluke, Martin succeeds, his drive suddenly seems irrelevant and he comes to a realization that maybe Ruth, too, was an abstraction. He can't square any of it with knowledge or reason – or even his own existence. At the end of this earnest and herculean quest Eden (and London?) finds himself “drifting,” drained and empty. He's stuck - rejecting both socialism and capitalism, disillusioned by the shallow mannerisms and fearful self-protectiveness of the bourgeoisie and unable to re-connect to his working class origins. The American Dream that has propelled so much of his work and upward aspiration seems suddenly pointless.

London's *Martin Eden* reverberates today, as so many struggle with formulating lives and identities that are tempted by their version of the dream and the hard work to achieve it, while simultaneously plagued by the inconstancies of class, money, race,

¹ *Martin Eden: Jack London's Splendid Dream* from *Critical Essays on Jack London*, Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin, editor. Copyright 1983 and published by G.K. Hall and Company, Boston.

gender and love. For Martin, this journey is further complicated by the long odds artists face, working outside the commercial mainstream and feeling unrecognized, even (or, maybe, especially) by Ruth.

Jack London analyst Jonah Raskin identifies Eden's (and London's) dizzying back-and-forth between "success and failure, strength and weakness, love and loss," all of which culminate in the story's closing moments.²

We found these ideas – and more - ripe for exploration and discovery of new angles and insights, through our non-stop dialogues about our characters and their relationships. Much, we agreed, would be articulated through subtexts. Casting would mean everything. And, on that front, students sifted through hundreds of actor resumes and organized our New York auditions. They brought back audition videos for all of our students to review and debate. We spent six weeks wrangling our cast, with some actors brought on several days into our production.

Andrew Richardson plays the title role and Hayley Griffith and Annet Mahendru appear as Ruth Morse and Lizzie Connolly, respectively. Richardson trained at Carnegie Mellon and London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and Royal Academy of Dance. His credits include eight film and television productions along with theatrical stagings of "Taming of the Shrew" and "Othello."

Annet Mahendru is best known for her co-starring role as Nina Krilova, the U.S. Russian embassy operative who has a love affair with FBI agent, Stan Beeman, in the Emmy-winning FX series, "The Americans." She also co-starred in the Amazon series, "The Romanoffs."

Hayley Griffith's credits include "Law and Order" and "Bull." Other supporting actors include Missy Yager ("Mad Men," "Manchester by the Sea"), Grainger Hines ("Lincoln," "The Ballad of Buster Scruggs"), Phil McGlaston (Broadway's "Little Foxes," Athol Fugard's "Master Harold and the Boys," August Wilson's "Fences"), Michael Benz ("Downton Abbey," "Joker"), Jo Armeniox ("Boardwalk Empire"), Ken Wulf Clark ("House of Cards") and Rebecca Faulkenberry (co-star of "Spiderman" on Broadway). Also Nantucket veteran of three of our films, Susan McGinnis as librarian Anna Wing, and 12 year-old Roan LaScola as Martin's niece, Alice.

We would have loved to shoot *Martin Eden* in the Oakland, California environs that Jack London intended. That was not possible, due to financial and logistical limitations. That said, we quickly warmed to the possibilities we found on Nantucket Island, including the fabulous 1837 Starbuck mansion on Main Street, that owner Rachel Freedman Slosek generously donated for use as the Morse family residence. We also scoured the island for distinctive woods and beach locations –

² *The Radical Jack London: Writings on War and Revolution* by Jonah Raskin. Copyright 2008, University of California Press

and building interiors that we could re-purpose for a turn-of-the-20th Century printer's office, elegant parlor, pawnshop and more. We built our laundry set in the Starbuck mansion basement. We constructed our tenement interior in the utility room of the American Legion Post 82 on Washington Street.

Fertile imaginations in every department made all of this come to life in unexpected ways. Our on-set department heads: production designer Maryam Khosravi, cinematographer David Dolnik, and costume designer Avery Reed deserve enormous credit for the look and feel of what we see on screen. Musicians Judy Hyman and Jeff Claus joined me for our eighth film together. Editor Patrick Kennedy mentored post-production students and worked on our last four films, as assistant camera on three of them. Producer India Blake is on her third consecutive foray with us. This was a strong team – and each student stepped up to every challenge – with remarkable pluck and esprit de corps.

Regarding the story, I'd say we hewed fairly close to London's narrative – though we couldn't do everything he describes in his novel – including the haunting final scene, so exquisitely written, that was impossible for us to stage. We did excerpt London's concluding passage and placed it over another scene, to foreshadow our ending. We also imported several other excerpts of London's writing from *People of the Abyss* and others – and gave them to Martin. London's novel doesn't really give us any samples of Eden's writing. Is he any good? We thought he was.

We were also attracted to London's photographs, taken on his world-wide sojourns, so we built several montages that bring to life what he saw and how he saw it. We use them to provide a link to London's own life and times – and to punctuate our film's rhythms, using words or music. Special thanks to the Huntington Museum, keeper of the Jack London photo collections.

We liked London's women characters and, through our dialogues, worked to develop them and add dimension. Martin loves his devoted but overtasked sister, Gertrude, but clashes with her suspicious husband, Bernard. He is attracted to stylish Ruth (or maybe the idea of Ruth) and he likes gritty and gutsy Lizzy Connolly even though his aspiration for success and wealth lead him away from her. We added some layers to Lizzie, whom we imagined in our screenplay to be a production line worker and labor organizer and at a hat factory, where she would have been exposed to hazardous conditions and the plight of child laborers. Lizzie also works with local suffragettes. In our work to detail her character, we found pertinent oral histories and early 20th century newspaper reports.

When Martin returns from dreary months working with his buddy Joe at the sweaty laundry at Shelly Hot Springs, he has saved enough cash to enable him to concentrate on his writing. Prevented by Bernard from returning to live with his and Gertrude's family, Martin rents a room in a poor neighborhood. His landlady, Portuguese immigrant Maria Silva, collects and cares for town orphans and

informally counsels Martin, who needs any help he can get. Then there is Martin's local librarian, Anna Wing, who is based on real-life Oakland librarian and California's first poet laureate, Ina Coolbrith, who first encouraged Jack London's reading and writing when he was ten years old. After one of our three-hour story discussions, a student remarked, "Martin is everywhere surrounded by women who shape who he is and what he does."

This may be one way our film differs from Pietro Marcello's handsome and visually inventive recent Italian version of Jack London's *Martin Eden*. I think we give our women characters more play. Marcello's politics also have a sharper bite, in keeping with its different time, setting and culture. Whereas we saw London's Martin as "falling from innocence" (hence, Eden), Marcello's protagonist has already plummeted. If our lead man earnestly applies himself, only to descend, Marcello's Eden inhabits a 1930's Italian nihilism at the start – articulating a kind of despair that only intensifies.

Marcello's *Martin Eden* has won a number of accolades and deserves them. I love his film's rough edges, rich Italian setting, direct narrative and how he cuts in evocative and haunting stock footage to suggest a poetic dreamscape. I raced to see his film as part of the fall 2020 New York Film Festival (online) but couldn't tell whether I was being transported into the world of 1910, 1930's or 1970's, especially when I caught sight of a modern-looking Volvo. I liked that feeling of displacement.

Marcello says he was most interested in this 1930's Italy, as fascism took hold under Mussolini. He attributes his Martin Eden's darker side to the fact of those difficult times and a sectarian Italian socialism that had been corrupted by authoritarian communism in Russia. Jack London's political vision, written some twenty years earlier, was informed, instead, by suffragettes, workers' fights for higher wages, better conditions and an end to child labor - and prairie populists who fought concentrations of power over them by banks, railroads and grain dealers.

"(London's) is a different kind of socialism," said Marcello, "the one that existed before the October Revolution. It's a kind of socialism that goes side-by-side with Christian beliefs--St. Francis' kind of socialism."³

Yes, Marcello's protagonist is also an individualist, like ours, and he industriously seeks to advance through education. But, as Marcello says, "during the second part of the film (Eden) becomes an anti-hero and is harder to identify with....he loses his connection to reality"⁴ and ends up lashing out at everyone.

³ Ibid

⁴ Pietro Marcello in his interview with Joshua Encinias, October 16, 2020.
<https://thefilmstage.com/martin-eden-director-pietro-marcello-on-the-damage-of-neoliberalism-and-the-need-for-true-socialism/>

Film critic Joshua Encinias describes Marcello's Martin Eden as "an interloper who educates himself and rises in society's ranks. His struggle is with the uneducated world from which he comes and the educated elites who want little to do with him."

Our Martin is not really an interloper, although he might be viewed that way by Ruth Morse's parents who, yes, "want little to do with him" until he achieves all-American fame and fortune. Again, our Martin is more of a dreamer, instantly intoxicated by what he sees in Ruth's world. And although he takes to immersing himself in books and ideas he is not "uneducated." We saw Jack London's Eden as a curious reader who spent many long nights on the ships he worked, reading whatever was laying around. During his first encounter with Ruth, he mentions knowing Longfellow's "Excelsior," with its mountaineer's call to "go higher," against all odds and advice, along the way.

The idea that working people are uneducated is a false stereotype, at least in my experience. Yes, people lacking privilege may be treated like they are uneducated and some may not have the same exposure as people with a lot of private education but, especially at the turn of the 20th Century before electronic media took hold, people read – and that's frankly why Jack London was America's best-selling writer. Working people read his novels, in droves. This more complex vision of Martin – and Jack London, who was largely self-educated, drove the conception and development of our protagonist.

Pietro Marcello's Martin is harder and darker than ours – on purpose. Italian politics were more developed than American politics – then or now. When Marcello pushes his Martin Eden into the middle of a bitter political fight on the left, broad Italian audiences probably know what he's talking about. Americans may not. In significant ways, our two different takes on this story reflect the time and place of each film's setting – and culture. Our Martin is still connected to the late 19th century and rising into modernity. Marcello's is more modern to start with.

Marcello's version of Martin's mentor, anarchist Russ Brissenden, though, may be closer to London's version than ours. He's a hard-bitten cynic who has seen it all. He's also white and a bit dissipated, as London's Brissenden was. Our Brissenden is Black, a labor organizer and socialist who remains close to the front lines. Like Martin, he writes and he reads Keats but they clash on politics.

In casting Brissenden as African American and both Lizzie and Maria as women of color we went contrary to London's generally all-white landscape. As Jack London scholar, Jonah Raskin, writes in his discussion of our film, "In London's 1908 book there are no Black characters or people of color. Brissenden is as white as can be. In fact, there are no significant Black characters in any of London's 50 books, though

there are some Mexicans and some Asians. The author wanted the real world to be for whites only.”⁵

“As a child,” Raskin writes, “London was raised by an African-American woman and an ex-slave, named Virginia Prentice, whom he called “Mammy,” much to her annoyance. It’s likely she would have been sad, hurt, and angry if she had read London’s essays, like “The Salt of the Earth,” on the superiority of the white race, and his letters in which he expresses what sounds like racist ideas.”⁶

Like Eden, London was a social Darwinian - and belonged to the Socialist Party for much of his life, although he dropped his affiliation during his final years. We chose to work some of these contradictions into our story – but felt that whatever white supremacist views London held were deplorable signs of those times and his own character – and were best left on the cutting room floor – at least for our film.

I had a recent discussion with Scarsdale high school students about my earlier film, *Peter and John*, based on a novel by 19th century French writer, Guy de Maupassant who, to me, appeared to be a misogynist. I chose to re-make Maupassant’s flawed protagonist, in that story, away from his inherent misogyny, while allowing certain more authentically motivated acts of cruelty toward his mother that revealed his deeper character and were essential to the story. I saw Maupassant’s reactionary attitude toward women, generally, as inappropriate and getting in the way, an overindulgence of the writer’s own pathetic views that the character would do well without.

Our Black Brissenden cuts Martin down to size, when it suits him – and he presses him politically – but he’s also engaged. He looks at the world around him, integrates what he sees into his work – and acts on it. He challenges Martin’s individualist politics – and may even get him thinking. Marcello’s individualist Martin Eden grabs a frayed copy of *Spleen and Ideal* by French provocateur Charles Baudelaire, who claimed arch reactionary Joseph de Maistre as his mentor.

Jack London’s Eden becomes enamored of British philosopher and social Darwinist, Herbert Spencer, whom we mention in our film. Though we also add Ralph Waldo Emerson, a more mainstream advocate for self-reliance. Brissenden responds to Eden’s claim of allegiance to individualist Emerson by citing his own literary heroes, among them progressives George Bernard Shaw, Dickens, Zola and Upton Sinclair. And we staged Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* as the play our characters see and debate. We hoped to incite a fair clash of ideas, among our characters, that percolated during this turbulent time.

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<http://www.theragblog.com/jonah-raskin-literature-to-cancel-or-not-to-cancel-jack-london/>

⁶ Ibid

I applaud Marcello's fluid and risk-taking style - and he pulls it off. Though who would have imagined that this story, neglected by filmmakers since a 1942 picture, *The Adventures of Martin Eden*, starring Glenn Ford and Claire Trevor - would attract two filmmakers at the same time? It's a chance you take when you work with a story in the public domain. I hope people will watch both films.

In a 1984 interview with *The Paris Review*, James Baldwin talked about knowing when to stop writing a novel. The same is true for making a film.

"When you've finished a novel it means, 'The train stops here,' he said. "You have to get off here.' You never get the book you wanted, you settle for the book you get. I've always felt that when a book ended there was something I didn't see, and usually when I remark the discovery it's too late to do anything about it."

I often don't really know a film I make - or fully its themes - until I've lived with it for a while and let it speak to me. And, yes, unanswered questions remain. But I look forward to getting to know *Martin Eden* a little better. As I do, and as audiences reveal what they see, I'm likely to return to this reflection on my experience with the film. After all, the final collaborators in this sprawling collaboration - are audience members who interact with what appears on screen and share their own imagination of it.

Jay Craven will produce a new full-credit Semester Cinema project during the winter-spring 2022 semester - and students from any college are invited to apply. Northern Vermont University will be our host college. For more information, go to www.SemesterCinema.org or contact Jay Craven at jcraven1590@gmail.com