

# Courtney Ryley Cooper

Journalist

1886-1940

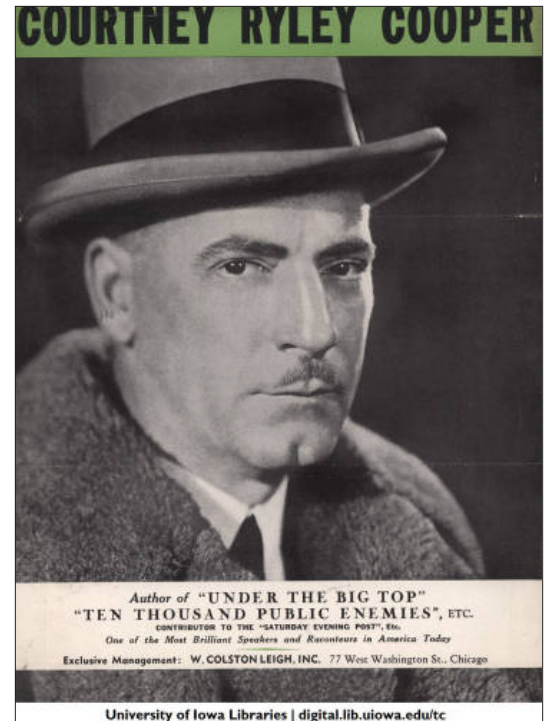
By Daniel Coleman

The idea of running away with the circus remained a fantasy to most of the American children who dreamed of it in the late 1800s, but not Courtney Ryley Cooper, who left his Kansas City home to travel with a circus troupe as a teen. The Big Top life never ceased to fascinate him, and Cooper drew upon it throughout his long career in another profession about which many dream but few realize success, that of a rich and famous adventure writer.

Born October 31, 1886, Courtney Ryley Cooper's Halloween arrival gained him an otherworldly reputation with his three sisters, who sensed something supernatural in their pixie-like younger brother. His parents, Catherine Grenolds and Baltimore Thomas Cooper, descended from early settlers of Maryland and Virginia. Young "Court" showed an unusual childhood connection with animals; his insistence on bringing the family cat along on hunting expeditions became family legend, and it was often impossible to tear him away from the exotic animals caged on Kansas City's circus grounds, fortuitously located several blocks from the Cooper home at 1424 Flora Avenue.

The death of his father in 1900 led to a state of domestic chaos from which Cooper slipped away to a small circus that had been encamped near his home. Between assignments as a water boy, sign painter, barker, dancer, and clown, he performed any other job he could handle. But he discovered his true calling while writing long letters home to his mother in which he described the many sights and sounds of his strange new life on the road. He returned to his family within the year, and by age 20 had talked his way into a job as a reporter for the *The Kansas City Star*.

Cooper was assigned to the police beat for much of his tenure at *The Star*, and covered the major crime stories of the day, from the bizarre "Adam God" Riot, to the mysterious death of Thomas Swope and subsequent murder trial of his son-in-law, Dr. Bennett Clark Hyde. In 1910, after writing a series of stories exposing Kansas City's criminal underworld, he was severely beaten and stabbed by thugs one evening while walking near 10th and Central.



He recovered to continue his rise through the ranks at *The Star*, but ambition drove him to dream bigger, and he frequently remarked to fellow reporters that they would someday “pay good, hard money” to read him.

Cooper left *The Star* in 1912, and after stints at the *New York World* and *Chicago Tribune*, landed at the *Denver Post*, from which he was abruptly hired away by a man he had interviewed just a day earlier. Buffalo Bill Cody was so impressed by Cooper’s ability to capture him in print that he offered Cooper the position of press agent for his traveling show. When the great showman died, Cooper was one of Buffalo Bill’s pallbearers and co-wrote a popular biography with Cody’s wife, *Memories of Buffalo Bill*, published in 1919.

Between public relations gigs for the Sells-Floto and Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circuses, Cooper became one of the best paid writers of the 1920s and ‘30s. In hundreds of pieces written for magazines like the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Hearst’s International*, he profiled exotic animals and locales, frequently returning to his favorite themes of circus life and wilderness adventure. Two books describing the former—*Under the Big Top* (1923) and *Lions ‘n’ Tigers ‘n’ Everything* (1924)—were followed by a biography of a Wild West Show colleague, *Annie Oakley, Woman at Arms* (1927). In a return to the crime writing of his *Star* days, Cooper, whose friendship with J. Edgar Hoover acquired him access to the FBI’s files, penned the lurid *Ten Thousand Public Enemies* (1935), perhaps his best known work.

His frantic pace—Cooper authored over 30 books, 400 or more magazine pieces, countless newspaper stories, and numerous works in other forms—was frequently cited as an explanation for the writer’s tragic suicide by hanging in a New York City hotel room on September 29, 1940. He and his wife of 24 years, Genevieve Furey Cooper, left no children. Perhaps as baffling as the prolific Cooper’s death was the brevity of his suicide note, which included only a terse set of instructions to pay his hotel bill with the money on his person.

### Sources

“Courtney Cooper.” *The Kansas City Star*, 30 September 1940.

“Courtney Ryley Cooper.” *Kansas City Journal-Post*, 3 August 1924.

“Courtney Ryley Cooper.” *The Kansas City Star*, 10 March 1929.

*Cumulative Book Index*. New York: H.W. Wilson & Co, 1924.

"Funeral of Cooper Set for Tomorrow." *New York Times*, 30 September 1940.

Jones, Harry, Jr. "Kansas City's Famous Sons and Daughters." *The Kansas City Star Magazine*, 19 October 1975.

"Life Here Aids a Writer." *The Kansas City Star*, 28 May 1926.

"Light on Cooper Death." *The Kansas City Times*, 30 September 1940.

Photo: Courtesy of University of Iowa Libraries, Special Collections & University Archives

©2009