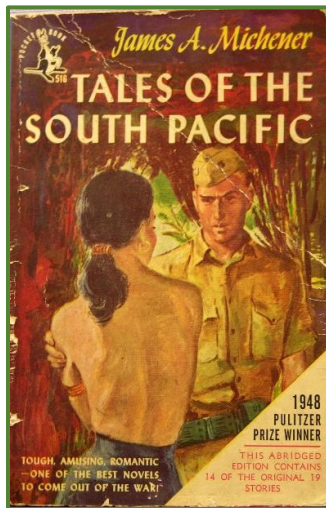


Sticking One's Neck Out

Behold the turtle; he makes progress only when he sticks his neck out.

That quote is from James Bryant Conant (1893 -1978), American chemist, president of Harvard University, and the first U.S. ambassador to West Germany.



And those words about the turtle had special meaning for James A. Michener (1907 – 1997), American author of more than 40 books, including his Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Tales of the South Pacific*.

When Michener was nearly 40, he was serving in the U.S. Navy on a remote island in the South Pacific. To kill time, he decided to write a book. He knew that the chances of anyone publishing it were practically nil. But he decided to stick his neck out and give it a try.

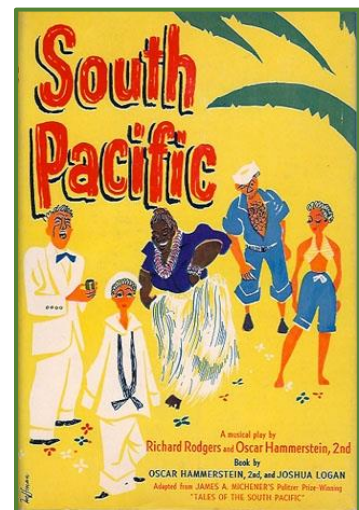
Michener had determined that the book would be a collection of short stories. A friend told him that nobody publishes short stories anymore. Even so, he stuck his neck out and went ahead.

The book was published and it got few reviews, but Orville Prescott, the book reviewer for *The New York Times*, reported that he liked the stories. Others decided they liked the book, too, and it wound up winning a Pulitzer Prize.

Kenneth McKenna, whose job it was to evaluate books for a Hollywood film company, tried to persuade his company to make a movie out of it, but the company decided the book “had no dramatic possibilities.” So McKenna stuck his neck out and brought the book to the attention of composers Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II.

When Broadway critics heard that Rodgers and Hammerstein were planning a musical called *South Pacific*, they guffawed and said, “Have you heard about the screwy idea? The romantic lead is gonna be a guy past 50. An opera singer named Ezio Pinza!”

Everyone knows what happened after that. *South Pacific* premiered in 1949 on Broadway and was an immediate hit, running for 1,925 performances. The plot of the musical was based on James Michener’s *Tales of the South Pacific* and combined elements of several of those stories. Rodgers and Hammerstein believed they could write a musical based on Michener’s work that would be financially successful and, at the same time, send a strong progressive message on racism.



(more)

“You can understand,” said Michener, “why I like people who stick their necks out.”

You would expect me to ask the question: Is there something strongly welling up inside of you urging you to stick your neck out?

– Beecher Hunter

