

KATHLEEN GALLIGAN

Ephemera, 2013
Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

ANDREA LEWIS

You Jane

Tracking the
legend of Tarzan

The 1932 movie *Tarzan the Ape Man* is the first feature film I remember seeing on television. I am six. It is 1954 and Tarzan rides toward me on an elephant, filling the small screen of our black-and-white Philco. I am deep into my late-night TV ritual, sugared up on root beer and salted down on sunflower seeds, gaping at the TV, dropping shells into a melamine bowl. Tarzan leaps from the elephant to wrestle an alligator in a churned-up river. He yodels the Tarzan yell and swings vine to vine to save Jane from a lion's jaws. The tomboy in me wants to be Tarzan and the little girl wants to be Jane. I want a leopard-skin minidress and a chimp sidekick. I want to put myself in danger, but I want to be rescued too, the way Jane is always rescued. Most of all, I want *Tarzan the Ape Man* to never end.

For movie fans of a certain age, “Tarzan” will always translate to one guy—Johnny Weissmuller. And Jane will always be Maureen O’Sullivan. Together they made six movies as Tarzan and Jane, and Weissmuller made six more with various Janes. His sixteen-year reign as Tarzan is considered the golden age of the character. A champion swimmer with no acting experience, Weissmuller was an instant hit as Tarzan. “However credible or interesting *Tarzan* may be on the printed page, I doubt very much if he emerges in such splendor as he does in the person of Johnny Weissmuller” (Thornton Delehanty in his review of *Tarzan the Ape Man* in 1932).

Before Weissmuller there were eight silent Tarzan films, and before any of the films there were the books. Tarzan’s creator, Edgar Rice Burroughs, was born in Chicago in 1875 to a semiprosperous family. Burroughs languished in a series of colorful jobs—cavalry soldier, gold miner, railroad cop, cattle drover—before he tried writing and eventually became the first American writer to be a corporation. Gore Vidal calls Burroughs “a fascinating figure to contemplate, an archetypal American dreamer. . . . He consoled himself with an inner world where he was strong and handsome, adored by beautiful women and worshiped by exotic races.” Burroughs tried writing for pulp magazines, then realized his own fantasy life was richer than anything the pulps had to offer. His first publication was a sci-fi serial set on Mars. The first Tarzan novel—*Tarzan of the Apes*—appeared in 1912 in the magazine the *All-Story*. The editor, Thomas Metcalf, was impressed enough to publish it in its entirety

rather than serialize it. An Edgar Rice Burroughs website tells us: “From this one novel sprang two dozen more, over forty movies, hundreds of comic books, radio shows, television programs, Tarzan toys, Tarzan gasoline, Tarzan underwear, Tarzan ice cream, Tarzan running shoes—the list is virtually endless.” Those spinoffs made Burroughs a wealthy man. In 1919 he bought 540 acres in California’s San Fernando Valley and called his estate Tarzana. It was later incorporated as the city of Tarzana.

In 1954, watching *Tarzan the Ape Man* on a late-night TV show, I wanted the same things Burroughs wanted in 1912: action and adventure. I was as innocent as Tarzan, who said things like, “Too much talk. Tarzan way better.” If a black leopard dropped from a tree onto Tarzan’s back and Tarzan pulled his knife and killed it, I was rooting for Tarzan, not the leopard, as I probably would today. In fact, when I revisited this movie as an adult, I was first swept by nostalgia and then hit by aftershocks of (1) *hilarity* at the zoo-parade of misplaced species trotting through the jungle (zebras, gazelles, rhinos); (2) *horror* at the portrayal of tribesmen and “savages,” many of whom seemed to be Anglo-Saxon men painted with lampblack and wearing a costume designer’s fantasy of feral-looking paraphernalia, from two-foot ostrich plumes to seashell necklaces, nose rings, and little feathered anklets; (3) *more horror* at the avidity with which animals were slaughtered; (4) *astonishment* at what a natural and believable performer Johnny Weissmuller truly was; (5) *surprise* at all the sexual undertones; and finally (6) *curiosity*, as I wondered what influences Jane might have had on me, role-model-wise.

In the first Tarzan novel, Jane shows up late. Before we meet her, we are treated to twelve chapters of coincidence-laden machinations to explain how a very white, very English, very superior baby comes to be orphaned in the jungle and raised by the sympathetic she-ape Kala. Then that baby metamorphoses into a chiseled specimen of elephant-riding, treetop-swinging, river-swimming, trap-setting, knife-wielding, lioness-killing, African-warrior-killing, boar-killing, gorilla-killing humanity who, thanks to his superior genes and white-heritage brain power, teaches himself to read and write from books left behind by his dead parents, John and Alice Clayton (aka Lord and Lady Greystoke). Whole chapters are in ape point of view. Then Jane finally strolls onto African soil—she is a proper Baltimore gal of

nineteen, helping her professor-father—and Tarzan gets his first glimpse of same-species womanhood. His head is “in a whirl of wonder,” but he’s soon rescuing Jane by pulling a lion backward by the tail through the window of her cabin. Later, when a giant ape threatens Jane, Tarzan must scoop her up, grab a vine, give a yell, and spirit her to safety in his cozy treetop home. Today Burroughs is still praised for the quality of his action sequences, but I have a feeling a modern editor would tell him to front the chick earlier. The movies did so. MGM purchased from Burroughs the right to use the characters, but the studio wrote their own stories, based loosely on plot points from the books.

The chemistry of Weissmuller and O’Sullivan on-screen is unmistakable. Filmed seventy years ago, there are scenes we might still call “hot.” Especially in the second Weissmuller/O’Sullivan pairing, *Tarzan and His Mate*. That movie includes an underwater swimming sequence of haunting, quicksilver beauty in which Jane (swum by Olympic champion Josephine McKim) is nude. Scenes like that, plus the skimpiness of Jane’s outfit when she was wearing one, plus the living-in-sin aspect of Tarzan and Jane’s arboreal union, were factors in the formation of Hollywood’s Legion of Decency. In an MGM retrospective in 1992, O’Sullivan said: “[Tarzan] was a man who had never seen a woman before, so it was a fairy tale—and yet it was two real people. He didn’t know what to do with a woman—I guess he found out pretty quick. . . . It was a lovely, innocent concept, and yet very sexy.”

It’s fun to wonder what my six-year-old, sugar-and-salt-addled brain was soaking up about the Tarzan/Jane partnership. Find a preverbal guy and let him protect you? Get in jams and trust you’ll be rescued? Be independent and courageous, up to a point, and then defer to a man? Maybe. But I’m not knocking Burroughs. There were plenty of cultural opportunities in the fifties for girls to absorb the damsel-in-distress formula. But Jane also trusted her instincts and was smart and intuitive enough to trust Tarzan’s natural goodness. She makes a lot of brave moves on her own, even if Burroughs does give her paragraphs like this one in the first novel: “Jane Porter—her lithe, young form flattened against the trunk of a great tree, her hands tight pressed against her rising and falling bosom, and her eyes wide with mingled horror, fascination, fear, and admiration—watched the primordial ape battle with the

primeval man for possession of a woman—for her.” In the Tarzan films, O’Sullivan plays Jane with less melodrama and more high-society spunk. She combines scared-at-first wonder with sex-goddess savvy, creating the perfect foil for Tarzan’s monosyllabic goodness. It didn’t hurt that she was stunningly beautiful.

O’Sullivan was eighteen in 1929, living in her native Ireland with no thought of acting or performing when director Frank Borzage spotted her at a horse show dinner-dance and asked if she’d come to California for a screen test. She ended up starring as Jane from 1932 to 1942 and going on to have a fifty-year career in film and onstage. She met her husband, director John Farrow, on the set of a Tarzan movie in 1935. Of their seven children, only their daughter Mia Farrow went on to become an actor. O’Sullivan always referred to Weissmuller as “a dear friend.”

Weissmuller entered his first swimming competition in 1921 and won every race he ever swam, including those in two Olympic Games, until he retired after his final meet on January 3, 1929. He was twenty-seven when he first starred as Tarzan, inhabiting the role and taking up acting with barely a ripple. “His sleek, muscular, yet symmetrical physique was like that of a lion, and his noble face and black mane of hair indeed gave Tarzan a regal ‘King of the Jungle’ appearance,” notes David Fury in an article on the *Burroughs Bibliophiles* website. As Tarzan, he somehow pulled off a winning combination of pride in his own majesty and humility in his uncluttered innocence. He was such an instant sex symbol that MGM asked him to divorce Bobbe Arnst, his wife of less than a year, in order to reap full rewards from his status as available-crush material. (The studio paid Arnst \$10,000 and she returned to her singing career.) Viewers today might say that Weissmuller didn’t need acting skills to play a naïve, almost speechless character or that his “essence of invincibility” (Fury again) was just Weissmuller being Weissmuller; but my take is that he *was* acting and he was brilliant. The adoring gazes he bestowed upon Jane may have come naturally for a ladies’ man (he would go on to have five more wives), and the Tarzan yell may have been easy because he’d practiced yodeling as a kid (it was also enhanced by an MGM sound technician using various high-pitched noises), but I like his complete dedication to the material and his pure, unselfconscious efforts through all the ludicrous situations:

riding a rhinoceros, conversing with Cheetah, fighting off plumed tribesmen, or lifting a man over his head to throw him into a pit (one of the stunts Weissmuller did himself, without trick photography).

Today Tarzan in his many incarnations is one of the most universally recognized characters from literature. He has been compared to Rousseau’s Natural Man, Kipling’s Mowgli, and the mythological Romulus and Remus. Burroughs created a legend, an archetype of strength and moral stamina whose basic character remains unchanged through one hundred years, from the first silent-film Tarzan to a TV-cop-show Tarzan to an animated Disney Tarzan. Gore Vidal points out, in a 1963 article for *Esquire*, how basic the appeal of Tarzan is, “which makes me think that he can still hold his own as a daydream figure, despite the sophisticated challenge of his two young competitors, James Bond and Mike Hammer.” Vidal says, “Tarzan is a classic dream-self.” To which I add: so is Jane. Back in 1954, bloated on root beer and bleary-eyed by the end of the movie, I don’t know if I dreamed of swinging on a vine or kissing Tarzan or attacking a band of ivory poachers or being rescued from a raging river. But I did learn about one thing that is better than danger or rescue: escape.

Andrea Lewis’s story collection, *What My Last Man Did*, won the Blue Light Books Prize and was published by Indiana University Press in 2017. Her work has appeared in many literary journals, including *Prairie Schooner*, *Cutthroat*, and *Quiddity*. Three of her stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She is a founding member of Richard Hugo House, a place for writers in Seattle.