Although he lost most of the profit when forced to liquidate his company, Selznick was right. "Gone With the Wind" became the greatest blockbuster of all time, grossing over $1.3 billion in domestic revenues. Thanks to TV, DVDs, prequels and sequels, it's still going strong, seven decades after its premiere.

In "Frankly, My Dear," film critic (and former Southern belle) Molly Haskell supplies a smart, sassy and sophisticated reappraisal of the novel and the movie. Like many of us, Haskell loves and resists the story, with its political, racial and gendered themes.

"Gone With the Wind," she points out, often persuasively, is awash in ambiguity. Mitchell and Selznick pandered to Americans' hunger for "aristocratic Anglo forebears, but also used an "upstart anti-aristocratic hoyden" to challenge the myths of the Old South.

Vain, obstinate, unafraid of hard work, "a bodice ripper in genteel covers," thrice-married and a rotten mother, Scarlett "resembles nothing so much (horrors!) as a Yankee girl."

Although she loses Rhett, Ashley, Melanie, her mother and father, "almost everyone and every thing," Haskell writes, "the real wonder" is that she escapes conventional forms of punishment: humiliation; an 11th hour reversal in which she's transformed by love into a submissive and self-sacrificing female; and death.

Scarlett is stung by Rhett's (apparent) indifference. But she "revives, shrugs it off in her inimitable way," and moves on. Scarlett, not Rhett, is "the real rogue."

The conflict between Northern and Southern values, Haskell reminds us, "lurks unresolved beneath the drama."

On the page — and on a Hollywood back lot — "Gone With the Wind" re-created an idealized Southern plantation, presided over by benign paternalists, kinder and gentler than Northern factory owners and landlords.

Mitchell and Selznick tapped Americans' nostalgia for family, and their propensity to forgive just about any transgression (even if it's committed by a Corleone or a Soprano) as long as clan members are likable — and look out for one another. For "reinventors of the American past, Civil War films and the reconciliation theme were made to order."

"Gone With the Wind," of course, "conveniently overlooked" the barbaric institution of slavery, took racial inferiority as a given, and recycled stereotypes of house "darkies" and shiftless field hands.

The servility of blacks, Haskell suggests, in her most controversial claim, "is closer to the reality of the period than Mammy's overweening strength and authority." She sees as well — or thinks she sees — a "hint of irony" in Hattie McDaniel's Mammy and "the furtive savvy of the underdog survivor" in Butterfly McQueen's Prissy. Nonetheless, it's safe to guess that few movie-goers looked "beyond the literal" with Haskell — and saw "the increasing power and importance of blacks" in the Reconstruction South.

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FRANKLY,MY DEAR GONE WITH THE WIND REVISED
By Molly Haskell
Yale University Press, $24

Associate Images:
Clark Gable and Vivian Leigh in a scene from "Gone With the Wind." Courtesy