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THE WRITER'S LIFE

The resurgence of Rudolph Wurlitzer

The unconventional writer's films have found new life on DVD, and now Two Dollar Radio has begun to bring his writing back. The latest is the two-fer '*Flats*' and '*Quake*.'

By Sam Adams

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Reading Rudolph Wurlitzer's novels is like watching a road movie backward. In his 1969 underground classic, "*Nog*," the narrator drifts across an amorphous terrain on which his shifting identity molds itself like soft clay. Rather than buttressing his sense of self, the journey seems to dissolve it, until what remains is something close to undifferentiated consciousness. "*Flats*" and "*Quake*," which followed "*Nog*" in rapid succession, mine much the same territory, a post-cataclysmic landscape in which heroic storytelling has been blown to bits.

Wurlitzer's determined departure from conventional structure would seem to make him an unlikely candidate for Hollywood. But in the early 1970s, he wrote the screenplays to "*Two-Lane Blacktop*" and "*Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*," which have since been acknowledged as two of the decade's signature films.

It wasn't so at the time. Both were box-office flops, and the latter was taken away from director Sam Peckinpah before he could complete his final cut. Wurlitzer did other movie work — including Alex Cox's anti-imperialist fable "*Walker*" and Bernardo Bertolucci's "*Little Buddha*" — but for the most part he drifted to the fringes, and nowhere more than in regard to his fiction, which quickly disappeared from print.

These days, however, there's something of a Wurlitzer resurgence in the works. His films have found new life on DVD, and the independent press [Two Dollar Radio](#) has begun to bring his writing back. In 2008, the publisher released "*The Drop Edge of Yonder*," his first new novel in nearly a quarter of a century; earlier this year, it reissued "*Nog*." Now come "*Flats*" and "*Quake*," collected together in one double-sided volume (244 pp., \$17 paper). For the first time in more than three decades, it's possible to investigate the interplay between Wurlitzer's novels and his screenplays, the way his radical experiments in one informed his canny deconstruction of the other.

“Now that I look back at it, the books are all connected with those films,” says Wurlitzer, who lives in upstate New York with his wife, photographer Lynn Davis. “I realize, my God, that was an amazing time, when you could proceed with a certain degree of autonomy and adventure. I would write one of those crazy books and go out and make a film, and I didn’t know what all the complaints about the movie business were about. I thought, ‘Wow, this is great!’ Of course, the big steel door shut down, and it was bad from then on.”

Wurlitzer’s great-grandfather, for whom he was named, made a fortune manufacturing musical instruments, especially organs and jukeboxes, but the family fortune had dwindled significantly by the time his great-grandson was born in 1937. Not that it mattered; Wurlitzer wanted to see the world. “The wanderlust kicked in when I was about 16 or 17,” he recalls. “I got a job on an oil tanker, as a wiper in the engine room. We went from Philadelphia to Spanish Morocco to Kuwait. After that, I spent lot of time in Europe, Paris, in the early 1960s, and in Majorca. New York in the ‘60s was a very exciting place for me.”

Along the way, he befriended an extraordinary roll call of 20th century artists: Robert Graves; William S. Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg; Robert Rauschenberg and Claes Oldenburg, with whom he worked on his first film; and future collaborators Philip Glass and Robert Frank. “It was an extraordinary time of complete permission,” he says.

Eventually, Wurlitzer followed his friend, filmmaker Jim McBride, to Los Angeles, which was very much to his taste. “The reason why I liked L.A. was that there was ‘no there there,’” he says. “It was open-ended, a frontier, however lazy and languid. One was left without a cultural envelope, with no dictations. When L.A. became more and more defined, overly cultural, that was when I fell out.”

Wurlitzer’s entree into the movies came at a time when the studios were desperate to tap into the swelling counterculture. The success of “*Easy Rider*” had proved there was money to be made, and if that involved handing the reins to unusual characters, it was worth the gamble. In the case of “*Two-Lane Blacktop*,” this meant director Monte Hellman, who had previously directed a pair of bleakly existential westerns for low-budget king Roger Corman. Hellman in turn tapped Wurlitzer.

Although Wurlitzer was ostensibly working from a pre-existing script — he shares story credit with “*Gunsmoke*” writer Will Corry — Hellman counseled him to throw out all but the central concept of a cross-country road race, which Wurlitzer turned into a parable for the futile allure of masculine independence. Like the characters in his novels, the protagonists of “*Two-Lane Blacktop*” are unnamed, but their attempts to outrun themselves ultimately lead to destruction. Not only do they burn out, but they also take the film, which appears to melt in the heat of the projector’s bulb, with them.

Wurlitzer’s novels also exploit the iconography of quintessentially American genres. Rather than being conquered, however, the frontier seems to have disappeared. “*Flats*,” first published in 1970, takes place in a directionless wasteland where the only signposts are the characters’ names: Memphis, Flagstaff, and Halifax. “*Quake*,” which appeared two years later, begins with Los Angeles being destroyed by the Big One. “It was a gut thing,” Wurlitzer says now of the

book. “I think ‘*Quake*’ was a sort of semiconscious, prescient acknowledgment that L.A. had radically changed for me. There were times I enjoyed being out there, but that sort of decreased as time went on, and I came to dread being out there.” Such dread is infused into the very marrow of the novel, which reads like a mash-up of “*On the Road*” and “*Waiting for Godot*,” marked simultaneously by perpetual motion and utter inertia.

Besides Kerouac and Beckett — whom he had to give up reading “because he meant too much to me” — Wurlitzer cites Western writer Louis L’Amour as an influence, if a circumscribed one. You can see it, refracted through the countercultural lens of both “*Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*” and “*The Drop Edge of Yonder*,” a picaresque that reimagines the Old West as Dharma trail. L’Amour, he notes, is “such a cliché, but the first couple of pages, when it’s about the phenomenology of writing into open space without any conceptual plan, are sublime. Then the whole form sets in, and it’s almost unreadable.”

For Wurlitzer, the idea is to adopt the open-ended landscape of the Western without its focus on the imposition of authority and law — or traditional storytelling. “What I was questioning was the whole naturalism of the narrative through-line,” he explains. “I was always walking on the edge of nihilism but hoping to find a way to transcend it.”

Eventually, Wurlitzer turned to Buddhism, whose influence is strongly felt in “*Hard Travel to Sacred Places*,” a 1994 nonfiction chronicle of a trip he and Davis took through Southeast Asia after the death of her 21-year-old son. And he has continued working — “*Two Telegrams*,” a screenplay he co-wrote with the late Michelangelo Antonioni, is proceeding toward filming — although he doesn’t seem overly concerned with drumming up new opportunities, preferring to wait until the right projects come along.

“When you get to be sitting on that long bench in front of the Trail’s End Saloon, you just get to the point where you have to do things for their own sake, and with total freedom,” he says. “Either that or you can get a job at Wal-Mart.”

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